

School Lawyer Program

Evaluation Report | July 2022 - June 2024



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Westjustice provides free legal help to people in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. We can help with a broad range of everyday problems. Please call (03) 9749 7720 to find out more about our services or to make an appointment.

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I acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands on which this report was written, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong Peoples of the Kulin Nation. I extend this acknowledgement to all First Nations Peoples of the lands on which the School Lawyer Program operates. I pay my respects to their Ancestors and Elders past and present and acknowledge sovereignty has never been ceded.

I would like to thank Westjustice staff, and the staff and students at the Grange P-12 College (Hoppers Crossing) and Wyndham Central College (Werribee), for taking the time to share their observations, experiences and insightful recommendations regarding the future of the School Lawyer Program. I would like to extend extra thanks to the two school lawyers for managing the impressive logistical task of ensuring staff, students and the evaluation team were where they needed to be during site visits, making it possible to gather the rich data presented in this evaluation report.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----------|
| Acknowledgements | 0 |
| Contents | 0 |
| Tables And Figures | 0 |
| Glossary | 0 |
| Executive Summary | 0 |
| Slp Impact Summary | |
| 1 Introduction: School Lawyer Program | 0 |
| 1.1 Project Overview | 0 |
| 1.1.1 Origins | 0 |
| 1.1.2 Description | 0 |
| 1.1.3 School Lawyer Program at the Grange P-12 | 0 |
| 1.1.4 School Lawyer Program at Wyndham Central College | 0 |
| 1.2 Evaluation Scope and Purpose | 0 |
| 1.3 Evaluation Approach | 0 |
| 1.4 Ethics | 0 |
| 1.5 Limitations | 0 |
| 2 Findings | 0 |
| 2.1 Legal Services Delivered | 0 |
| 2.1.1 Legal Assistance | 0 |
| 2.1.2 Legal Education | 0 |
| 2.2 Outcomes for Students | 0 |
| 2.2.1 Student Legal Knowledge | 0 |
| 2.2.2 Student Empowerment | 0 |
| 2.2.3 Student Health and Wellbeing | 0 |
| 2.2.4 Student Legal Issues Addressed | 0 |
| 2.2.5 School Engagement | 0 |
| 2.3 Outcomes for Schools | 0 |
| 2.3.1 Holistic Wellbeing Support | 0 |
| 2.3.2 Access To Proactive and Responsive Legal Education | 0 |
| 2.3.3 Staff Legal Knowledge | 0 |
| 2.3.4 Enhanced Curriculum | 0 |
| 2.4 Program Enablers | 0 |
| 2.4.1 School Lawyer Skills and Attributes | 0 |
| 2.4.2 Accessibility and Office Location | 0 |
| 2.4.3 Legal Confidentiality | 0 |
| 2.4.4 Integrated but Independent Role | 0 |
| 2.4.5 Other Enabling Factors | 0 |
| 2.5 Program Challenges | 0 |

| | |
|--|----------|
| 2.5.1 Student Attitudes to Help-Seeking | 0 |
| 2.5.2 Time On-Site, at Large Schools | 0 |
| 2.5.3 Wellbeing Staff Not Co-Located | 0 |
| 2.5.4 Student Willingness to take Action | 0 |
| 2.5.5 Other Challenges | 0 |
| 2.6 Value of the School Lawyer Program | 0 |
| 2.6.1 Prevention | 0 |
| 2.6.2 Costs Avoided | 0 |
| 2.6.3 The Student Experience | 0 |
| 2.6.4 The Staff Experience | 0 |
| 2.6.5 Benefits for Schools | 0 |
| 2.6.6 Understanding Legal Issues Experienced by Young People | 0 |
| 2.7 Stakeholder Suggestions for the School Lawyer Program | 0 |
| 3 Conclusions | 0 |
| 3.1 Legal Services Delivered | 0 |
| 3.2 Effectiveness | 0 |
| 3.2.1 Outcomes For Students | 0 |
| 3.2.2 Outcomes For Schools | 0 |
| 3.3 Value | 0 |
| 4 Recommendations | 0 |
| 5 Methodology | 0 |
| 5.1 Data Collection Methods | 0 |
| 5.1.1 Service Delivery Data | 0 |
| 5.1.2 Student Interviews | 0 |
| 5.1.3 Legal Assistance Questionnaire | 0 |
| 5.1.4 Stakeholder Interviews | 0 |
| 5.1.5 Legal Education Feedback | 0 |
| 5.1.6 Client Stories | 0 |
| 5.2 Data Analysis | 0 |
| 5.3 Reporting | 0 |

Tables and figures

| | |
|---|---|
| Table 1: Summary of legal assistance services provided across two SLP sites and client demographics | 0 |
| Figure 1: Key elements and outcomes of a School Lawyer Program | 0 |
| Figure 2: School Lawyer Program Strategic Narrative | 0 |
| Figure 3: Main areas of law that students were assisted with by the SLP across two sites, 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2024; number of legal services provided and percentage of all legal services provided | 0 |
| Figure 4: Main areas of law and type of assistance provided to students by SLP across two sites, 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2024; number of legal services provided | 0 |
| Figure 5: SLP referral sources across two sites, 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2024; number and percentage of referrals | 0 |
| Figure 6: Data sources | 0 |

GLOSSARY

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| CLC | Community legal centre |
| CLE | Community legal education |
| Myki | Ticketing system used for electronic payment of fares on public transport services in Melbourne and regional Victoria, Australia. |
| NLAP | National Legal Assistance Partnership 2020-25 is a national partnership agreement between the Australian Government and all states and territories for Australian Government funded legal assistance. It includes funding for services delivered by community legal centres. |
| Out-of-home care | A temporary, medium or long-term living arrangement for children and young people who cannot live in their family home. |
| PSIO | Personal safety intervention order |
| SLP | School Lawyer Program |
| The Grange | The Grange P-12 (Prep to Year 12) College |
| VLA | Victoria Legal Aid |
| VOCAT | Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal |
| WCC | Wyndham Central College |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Westjustice began implementing the SLP in 2015, in partnership with schools in Melbourne's west. The SLP involves a lawyer being embedded in a school's Wellbeing team, working part-time on-site, providing accessible, free and confidential legal advice and legal case management to students, along with legal education to students, teachers and allied staff. The school lawyers' work focuses on prevention and client empowerment.

To capture the culmination of nearly a decade's experience and investment in SLPs, Westjustice commissioned this evaluation to assess and document the effectiveness of the current SLP approach and its value for different stakeholders. Two long established partner schools – The Grange P-12 College and Wyndham Central College – were included in the evaluation, which considered the last two years of operations of the SLP at those sites. The evaluation team interviewed 35 stakeholders including students (clients and non-clients), school staff and Westjustice staff, and analysed survey data collected from student clients and service delivery data. Prior to commencing, the evaluation was reviewed and approved by the Anglicare Victoria's Research Ethics Committee (AVREC) and by the Performance and Evaluation Division, Victorian Department of Education.

Legal services delivered

Between 1 July 2022 and 30 June 2024, the SLP provided 561 **legal assistance services** (including legal information, advice, referral and representation) to 196 students across the two schools. Students assisted ranged in age from 12 to 19 years (average = 15 years and 4 months) and were most often female identifying (52%). The areas of law that students most commonly sought assistance with were criminal law, employment law and family violence, and more than half of students self-referred to the service.

The SLP delivered 105 **legal education sessions**, reaching more than 6,140 secondary students. Sessions addressed single or multiple legal topics, the main ones being bullying and cyber bullying, sexting, assault and group offending, work rights and consent and age of consent.

Absence of targets precluded the evaluation from assessing the sufficiency of these service delivery numbers, however, and importantly, both of the schools and Westjustice indicated they were satisfied that the SLP is providing students with accessible legal assistance and relevant legal education, while seeing some scope for delivering more.

Outcomes for students

The evaluation found that the SLP has increased students' understanding of their rights and responsibilities, key elements of laws likely to impact their daily lives and signs to be alert to in various situations that indicate legal help may be needed. Legal education was identified as the main method for improving student **knowledge**. Education sessions can reach several hundred students simultaneously (e.g. through presentations at assembly), though deeper learning was found to result from smaller, interactive legal education sessions.

The evaluation found that legal assistance and legal education provided by the SLP has **empowered** students. Those who received legal assistance have felt listened to, supported, and treated with respect, and were helped to understand their legal options such that they felt empowered to make decisions about their legal issue. Legal education delivered in response to emerging legal issues was found to help equip students to better understand the implications of those issues (e.g. sexting) and feel more confident making informed decisions about them. Additionally, presence of the school lawyer on-site and legal education sessions were found to increase student familiarity and comfort with lawyers, and to raise awareness of free legal services, thereby helping empower students to seek legal help if/when needed, beyond their time as secondary students.

A range of student **legal issues** have been **addressed** by the SLP in areas of law that the school lawyers have expertise or can make supported referrals. Outcomes have included waiver of fines, withdrawal of criminal charges and student clients have been supported to self-advocate regarding employment problems. Where legal issues were not resolved, this was usually because the student made an informed choice not to pursue a legal remedy.

The evaluation found that the SLP contributed to **improved student health and wellbeing**. Students often felt less distressed when informed of their options for resolving legal problems and felt less alone and more confident about their situation improving, with the respectful and non-judgmental support of a school lawyer.

The evaluation found that the SLP has contributed to **improved school engagement** in several ways, including by helping resolve legal issues that were causing students stress that interfered with their ability to attend or participate in class, and by helping students with criminal matters to understand that regularly attending school can contribute to a better

legal outcome for them. School lawyers have also linked migrant and refugee students to citizenship support, through which many have obtained citizenship and are now eligible for reduced university fees and are therefore more likely to access tertiary education.

Outcomes for schools

The evaluation found that the SLP has helped schools provide students with **more holistic support** for issues faced while in school, and better prepare students for adulthood. The SLP has enabled schools to provide timely **proactive and responsive legal education** and has enhanced the delivery of **curriculum** (e.g. Respectful Relationships).

The SLP has helped improve **staff knowledge** about student rights and the laws commonly affecting adolescents, with some staff becoming sufficiently confident to share legal information with students and their families/carers. Staff knowledge has been uplifted through staff being present at legal education sessions delivered to students by school lawyers, through secondary consultations with school lawyers and to a lesser extent, legal education sessions delivered to staff by school lawyers.

Program enablers and challenges

The evaluation found four key **enabling factors** that support the delivery and effectiveness of the SLP:

- School lawyer skills and attributes, including: personal qualities (e.g. friendly, non-judgemental, flexible); communication skills; knowledge and experience in areas of law relevant to young people; ability to quickly build rapport and trust with young people
- Accessible office location, co-located with all other wellbeing staff and regular days on-site
- Legal confidentiality, when understood by students, helps them feel safe and confident to seek help (or take up a referral) and share personal information with the school lawyer
- School lawyer is integrated with the Wellbeing team (which supports access, referrals and collaboration), but also independent of the school (e.g. not bound by the same reporting obligations as school staff).

The evaluation identified four main **challenges** to the SLP achieving its intended outcomes:

- Student attitudes to help-seeking, including negative attitudes towards lawyers and/or misunderstanding

the role of lawyers (despite ongoing relationship building and education by school lawyers) and negative attitudes toward seeking help from the Wellbeing team

- When on-site only one or two days per week at large schools, it is difficult to reach all students with legal education, to maintain awareness of the SLP among students and staff, and to build the relationships and rapport that support referrals
- When Wellbeing staff and school lawyers do not work in the same physical space, collaboration is more difficult and emerging trends in legal issues are harder to identify
- Students are sometimes unwilling to take legal action to resolve an issue because they are concerned about repercussions or do not think a positive outcome is likely enough to warrant the stress or effort. While this can be a challenge to changing or improving a student's circumstances, an informed choice not to take legal action is an empowered act.

Value of the SLP

The evaluation found that the SLP is highly valued for the range of benefits it produces.

Prevention

Legal education and assistance provided by the SLP was found to reduce and prevent decisions and behaviours by students that can lead to legal problems. Numerous students reported that the school lawyer's work helped them better understand possible legal consequences to their behaviour, which gave them pause to reflect prior to engaging in certain behaviours. When informed, students can better assert their rights and/or make decisions to enhance rather than risk their safety. Legal education was also found to help equip young people with language and information to think and speak about their rights and challenge attitudes that normalise abuses such as violence and discrimination.

Costs avoided

Empowered with information, some students are more likely to make decisions that both keep them safe and reduce the likelihood of interactions with the criminal justice system, thereby contributing to reduced police and court costs for government. (E.g. \$1,233 per criminal matters disposed of in the Children's Court.¹) For those students with court matters, the preparation and negotiations the school lawyer undertakes can reduce the number of matters that go to hearing, the court time required and the likelihood of a custodial sentence, representing further cost savings to the justice system. (E.g. youth detention costs \$5,906 per day.²)

Student experience

Students highly value having access to a knowledgeable and caring lawyer at school who they can easily talk to, who they feel is on their side and who supports them without judgement or shaming.

Staff experience

Staff greatly appreciate the ability to easily refer students with legal problems to high quality legal assistance on-site and to readily organise legal education to address incidents at school or emerging issues. With the support of the SLP to address students' legal needs in a timely manner, teaching & Wellbeing staff can focus more on their areas of expertise.

Benefits for schools

The partnership between the schools and Westjustice has provided schools with greater awareness of and connection to other programs and supports that may benefit students and school families (e.g. citizenship program, travel pass program). The SLP also enhances schools' Tier 1 interventions to promote and support student mental health and wellbeing.

Understanding youth legal issues

Being embedded in secondary schools gives school lawyers and their CLCs current and deeper insights about young people's legal needs and their experiences of legal issues. For Westjustice, this improves the ability to respond to and advocate for young people throughout its Youth Law Program.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1: Increase publicity of the SLP at schools. Increased advertising is needed for wider awareness of the SLP among students and staff, including when and how to access the school lawyer and matters they can assist with.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Increase time lawyer spends on-site. Spending 3 – 4 days per week on-site would enable the school lawyers to build stronger relationships, trust and rapport, deliver more legal education, and provide more appointments across a wider range of times.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Increase proactive legal education. There is demand for more legal education, including in primary school settings, and its effectiveness can be enhanced through additional support to school lawyers in its design and evaluation.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Expand the SLP to other schools in Melbourne's west and throughout Victoria. The SLP enhances the suite of Tier 1 interventions that schools provide to promote and support student mental health and wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Refine data collection and recording. With better data, the SLP could improve how it tracks, understands and shares its achievements and progress, including costs avoided through prevention and early intervention.

¹ The Victorian Budget 2023-24 Paper No. 3 states the average cost per case of criminal matters disposed of in the Children's Court was \$1,233 in 2021-22 (2023-24 Service Delivery).

² In Victoria in 2022-23, the cost per day to keep a young person in detention was \$5,906 (17 Youth justice services - Report on Government Services 2024 - Productivity Commission)



SLP IMPACT SUMMARY

Key findings about the impact of the SLP from 1 July 2022 TO 30 June 2024, at The Grange P-12 College AND Wyndham Central College.

SERVICES PROVIDED

The SLP provided:



561 legal services to **196** students



School lawyers delivered:

198
legal information /chats

175
legal advices

108
warm referrals

51
representation services



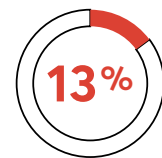
Top 4 legal matter types students were assisted with:



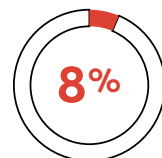
criminal law



employment law



family violence



Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal



School lawyers delivered 105 CLE sessions, reaching more than

6,140
secondary students

Top 5 CLE topics:

- Bullying and cyber bullying
- Sexting
- Assault and group offending
- Work rights
- Consent and age of consent

WHY IT MATTERS



Impact of legal assistance services & legal education on students:

- Increased legal knowledge
- Empowered to make decisions about legal problems
- Equipped to deal with emerging legal issues
- Improved wellbeing
- Legal issues addressed
- Improved school engagement

Student quotes:

"It's really good to have a school lawyer because you get more educated on [legal] things and then you're able to bring them up with your friends if they're in that situation and vice versa."
- Student non-client

"[If there was no School lawyer] ...I would probably just be in a state of mental instability and just financially struggling... it is a sense of panic when you don't know what to do."
- Student client

"She helped me understand consequences to make better choices."
- Student client

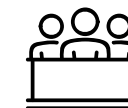
"The legal issue was definitely a distraction for me in class as much as I tried to avoid it. But it was just thoughts always come into play. And so now we're bit over and done with. I pretty much had just forgotten about the case and I've been working positively on my work."
- Student client

WHY IT WORKS

Key factors that support legal help-seeking by students & engagement with legal education and legal assistance:



School lawyers' skills & personal attributes



Onsite & easily accessible



Integrated with, but independent from the school's Wellbeing team



Legal confidentiality



1.1 PROJECT OVERVIEW

1.1.1 Origins

Westjustice, a not-for-profit registered charitable organisation and CLC that provides free legal help to people in the western suburbs of Melbourne, has provided specialist Youth Law services to young people for over 20 years.

In 2014, responding to identified unmet legal need, Westjustice provided a weekly outreach drop-in clinic for secondary students at The Grange P-12 College, Hoppers Crossing (The Grange). Key findings from the outreach clinic shaped the vision for the first SLP, a pilot involving a school lawyer working onsite 4 days per week at The Grange from 2015 to 2017. The pilot was evaluated in 2018 and key lessons about embedding a legal service in a school to respond to the needs of young people for early intervention and prevention education and for legal advice and representation, were identified that have informed the development of the model. Evaluation of the pilot SLP found the model was appropriate for addressing unmet legal need, and produced a range of intended outcomes, including improvements to students' legal knowledge, wellbeing and resolution of legal issues.

The success of the pilot was such that the SLP has become an established part of The Grange's Wellbeing program. Since the pilot, Westjustice has partnered with a further seven schools in Melbourne's west (or near to), to implement SLPs – WCC, Werribee; Hester Hornbrook Academy, Sunshine Campus; Tarneit Senior College, Tarneit; Wyndham Community and Education Centre, Werribee; Laverton P-12 College, Laverton; Warringa Park School, Hoppers Crossing; and most recently Parkville College, Parkville Youth Justice Centre, Parkville.

1.1.2 Description

The SLP involves a lawyer being embedded in a school's Wellbeing team, providing accessible, free and confidential advice to students. The lawyer also provides legal education to students, teachers and allied staff. The SLP is designed to create benefits for students and for the schools that run them, including improved health and wellbeing for students and engagement at school (see Figures 1 and 2).

The school lawyer is employed by a local community legal centre, Victoria Legal Aid, or other legal organisation. In relation to providing legal advice and legal education, the school lawyer is supervised by the legal organisation.

The model is adapted to suit the school and match resourcing, such that the number of days the SLP operates, may vary from school to school.

As a member of the school's Wellbeing team, core activities delivered by the school lawyer include:

- One on one legal advice and legal case management to students
- General and targeted legal education to students in school to respond to emerging issues and
- Warm referrals of students to other sources of legal and non-legal support.

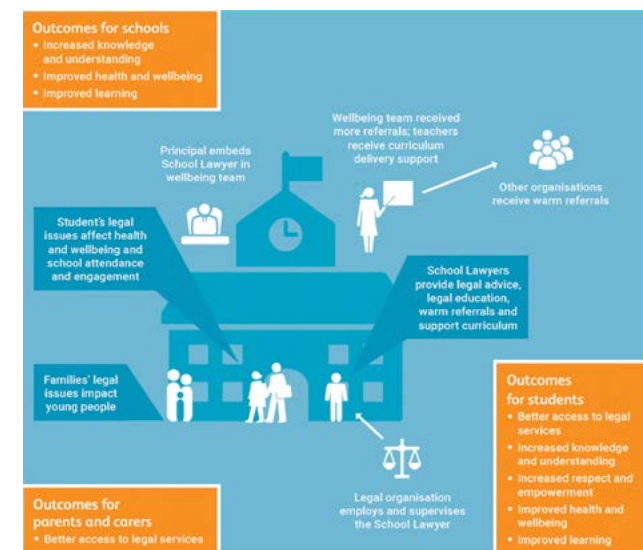


Figure 1: Key elements and outcomes of a School Lawyer Program³

Community legal education is generally delivered during school hours with sessions aiming to support and supplement the school curriculum. Whilst the SLP does not focus on CLE in legal studies classes, the school lawyer will occasionally create lesson plans and deliver sessions in collaboration with the legal studies teacher to align with legal studies curriculum.

All Westjustice SLPs operate according to binding deeds of agreement, updated each calendar year, between each school and the CLC. The current Services Deed (2024), developed by the Victorian Department of Education, key Westjustice staff and Westjustice's pro bono partner lawyers, sets out the parameters of the SLP including matters such as fees payable, obligations of each party, risk management and dispute resolution.

| Because: | We deliver: | This meets: |
|---|--|--|
| Many young people face barriers in access to justice, and do not understand their legal rights and responsibilities | A program which embeds lawyers in schools to provide free, accessible, confidential legal assistance & education | The immediate needs of students, schools, and families in receiving legal advice & education |

| Which leads to: | That results in: |
|---|--|
| Students having legal issues addressed, whilst feeling supported, empowered and respected | Students having improved health and wellbeing and being more engaged at school |

Figure 2: SLP Strategic Narrative⁴

The SLP model is aligned with the six principles of the National Strategic Framework for Legal Assistance 2020 - 2025⁵, in particular through its focus on prevention (principle 4) and client empowerment (principle 5), and as a collaborative and integrated (principle 2), client-centred, innovative service approach (principle 2).

1.1.4 School Lawyer Program at The Grange P-12

The Grange P-12 College is a prep to year 12 school with two campuses in Hoppers Crossing. The primary school is located at the Callistemon campus and the high school and Sports Science Academy are located at the Deloraine campus. The SLP operates at the Deloraine campus, which is divided into four sub-schools consisting of the Middle Years (7/8), Year 9, the Later Years (10/11/12), and the Sports Science Academy which extends from Grade 4 to Year 12. The Deloraine Campus hosts a population of approximately 1300 students and over 120 staff members across the four sub-schools. The Callistemon campus hosts a population of approximately 700 students.

- The SLP was piloted in 2015 and is now in its tenth year of operation.
- The school lawyer is funded for 1.5 days per week – one day on-site and half a day off-site.
- The school lawyer has an office in the Careers and Pathways building where the school's career counsellors, mentor, doctor and nurse are also located. Each sub-school has a counsellor who is part of the Wellbeing team but is physically located within the sub-school⁶.

1.1.4 SLP at Wyndham Central College

Wyndham Central College is a large government single campus secondary college located in south-west Wyndham. The College has the capacity to accommodate approximately 1800 students across years 7 - 12. The school has a diverse student population and strives to provide wrap around support for students and whole family groups.

- The SLP commenced at WCC in 2017 and is now in its 8th year of operation.
- The school lawyer is funded for 2.5 days per week – two days on-site and half day off-site.
- The school lawyer has an office in the Student Services building, where all Wellbeing staff are located, including allied health counsellors and mental health practitioners, learning support and inclusion officers, career counsellors, social workers, and the school nurse.

³ SLP Framework (March 2018)

⁴ Source: School Lawyer Program Framework (March 2018)

⁵ Council of Attorneys-General. <https://www.ag.gov.au/legal-system/publications/national-strategic-framework-legal-assistance-1-july-2020-30-june-2025>. The National Strategic Framework "provides the policy framework for all government legal assistance funding including an overarching objective and aspirational principles, to guide legal assistance policy development, service delivery and sector planning."

⁶ The Year 10/11/12 counsellor has an office in the Wellbeing building, while the Year 7/8 and the Year 9 counsellors are physically located within the respective sub-schools on the other side of the campus, approximately 3 minutes' walk away. The Sports Science Academy counsellor is located in the sports building.

1.2 Evaluation scope and purpose

This evaluation was commissioned by Westjustice to assess the effectiveness of the SLP; identify and document factors that influence its effectiveness; and demonstrate the value of the SLP for different stakeholders. The evaluation will also be used by Westjustice to develop recommendations and inform the ongoing development of the SLP.

The evaluation included partner schools where the SLP has been operating for at least 12 months – The Grange P-12 College and Wyndham Central College. It reviewed the **last two years of operations** of the SLP at both sites: 1 July 2022 - 30 June 2024.

This evaluation addressed the following **key domains** and **questions**:

| KEY DOMAIN | QUESTIONS |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Legal Services Delivered | 1. To what extent has the SLP provided students with accessible legal assistance and relevant legal education? |
| Effectiveness – Outcomes For Students | 2. To what extent has the SLP increased students' knowledge as intended? 3. To what extent has the SLP empowered students as intended? 4. To what extent have students' legal issues been addressed through the SLP? 5. To what extent is the SLP impacting student health, wellbeing and school engagement? |
| Effectiveness – Outcomes For Schools | 6. To what extent has the SLP increased staff knowledge as intended? 7. To what extent has the SLP improved the education and support provided by schools? |
| Value | 8. What value does the SLP provide? |
| Recommendations | 9. What is recommended regarding the future of the SLP? |

1.3 Evaluation approach

This evaluation used a multi-site case study approach, collecting primarily qualitative data supplemented by quantitative survey data, to answer the evaluation questions. There were 35 stakeholders interviewed including student clients (i.e. students who received 1:1 legal information, advice or representation from the school lawyer), student non-clients (i.e. students who had not received 1:1 legal assistance but had received legal education), school principals, Wellbeing staff, teachers, the school lawyers and the Westjustice project manager. Stakeholders were asked to share their observations and insights about benefits of the SLP and how it might be improved. Feedback was also collected from student clients over a four-week period by the school lawyers, via an anonymous online questionnaire.

Full details of the methodology are described in Section 5.

1.4 Ethics

This evaluation underwent two independent ethical review processes, as required by the Victorian Department of Education. This included:

Review by the Anglicare Victoria Ethics Committee (AVREC) and approved in February 2024 (approval number 2024-02)

Review by the Performance and Evaluation Division, Victorian Department of Education and approved in May 2024 (application ID: 23-11-182).

1.5 Limitations

The evaluation had access to limited quantitative data regarding the legal outcomes for student clients who were provided with legal assistance. This was in part due to Westjustice changing data systems (from CLASS to Actionstep) during the period covered by this evaluation, and in part due to inconsistent and/or incomplete data entry by school lawyers. As a result, this report describes examples of outcomes achieved but cannot quantify them. Triangulation of qualitative data from multiple sources confirmed the validity of the outcomes herein reported.

The inability to quantify the outcomes achieved by the school lawyers also precluded the evaluation from calculating an estimate of the total costs avoided for government by the SLP. Nor did the program have additional resources to undertake a detailed economic evaluation to accurately estimate the total costs avoided for government through the SLP's prevention and early intervention work. Instead, the evaluation

team used case studies (along with publicly available data on the costs of different government funded services) to calculate estimates of the prospective costs avoided through the school lawyer's work in two example instances. These case studies are presented in section 2.6.2.

Feedback from students about the quality and effectiveness of legal education delivered to them, was scant. It is recognised that it is impractical to collect feedback from larger audiences (e.g. presentations at school assemblies), however most smaller sessions (e.g. interactive activities with a single class) also did not collect feedback. The evaluation relies on qualitative data to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of legal education, supplemented by quantitative data from two sessions. Triangulation of this data confirmed its validity.





2.1 LEGAL SERVICES DELIVERED

This section presents a summary of the legal services – which includes legal assistance and legal education – provided by the SLP to students at The Grange and WCC between 1 July 2022 and 30 June 2024.

This evaluation's use of the term 'legal services' follows the National Legal Assistance Data Standards Manual definitions of terms⁷. The term 'legal services' covers:

- Legal assistance: refers to services called 'discrete assistance' (i.e. information, referral, advice, legal task) and 'legal representation'
- Legal education: refers to 'community legal education' (CLE) activities⁸.

2.1.1 Legal assistance

Between 1 July 2022 and 30 June 2024:

- The SLP assisted **196 students** across the two schools, consisting of:
 - **Gender:** 52% (103) identified as female; 37% (72) identified as male; 11% (21) identified as non-binary or transgender or did not share their gender (See Table 1)
 - **Age:** Students ranging in age from 12 to 19 years. Average age was 15 years and 4 months (16 years at The Grange; 15 years and 2 months at WCC). At both schools, the most common age of students assisted was 16 years.
- The SLP provided **561 legal assistance** services across the two schools (see Table 1)
 - 139 legal assistance services provided to 64 students at The Grange; average number of legal services per client = 2.2
 - 422 legal assistance services provided to 132 students at WCC; average number of legal services per client = 3.2.

• The SLP provided a range of **types of legal assistance** to students, mainly legal information and legal advice (see Table 1). Of the 561 legal assistance services delivered, the main ones were:

- Legal information/chat - 35.3% (198)
- Legal advice - 31.2% (175)
- Warm referral⁹ - 19.3% (108)
- Representation - 9.1% (51)

• Among the 561 legal assistance services delivered, help was most commonly sought in the following **areas of law** (see Figures 3 and 4):

- Criminal law – 25.3% (142); two thirds of these services were legal information or advice¹⁰
- Employment law – 12.8% (72)
- Family violence – 12.5% (70)
- General – 10% (56)
- Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT) – 7.5% (42)
- Migration – 7.3% (41)

• Students came to the SLP through a **range of referral sources:**

- Approximately half of services delivered across the two schools resulted from self-referral¹¹ (52.9%, 297) and one quarter from referrals by Wellbeing staff (25.3%, 142) (see Figure 5)
- At The Grange, the main referral source was Wellbeing staff (44.6%), while at WCC it was self-referral (60.2%).

| | THE GRANGE P-12 COLLEGE | WYNDHAM CENTRAL COLLEGE | TOTAL |
|--|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| NO. STUDENTS ASSISTED | 64 | 132 | 196 |
| GENDER | | | |
| Female | 37 | 66 | 103 |
| Male | 20 | 52 | 72 |
| Non-binary/Transgender/Not specified ¹² | 7 | 14 | 21 |
| AGE | | | |
| Average | 16 yrs | 15 yrs 2 mths | 15 yrs 4 mths |
| Mode | 16 yrs | 16 yrs | 16 yrs |
| Range | 13 – 19 yrs | 12 – 19 yrs | 12 – 19 yrs |
| NO. LEGAL ASSISTANCE SERVICES | | | |
| Legal information/chat | 64 | 134 | 198 |
| Legal advice | 42 | 133 | 175 |
| Representation | 14 | 37 | 51 |
| Warm referral | 11 | 97 | 108 |
| Discrete non-legal support | 4 | 9 | 13 |
| Legal task | 3 | 12 | 15 |
| Assisted self-help | 1 | - | 1 |
| | 139 | 422 | 561 |

Figure 3: Main areas of law that students were assisted with by the SLP across two sites, 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2024; number of legal services provided and percentage of all legal services provided

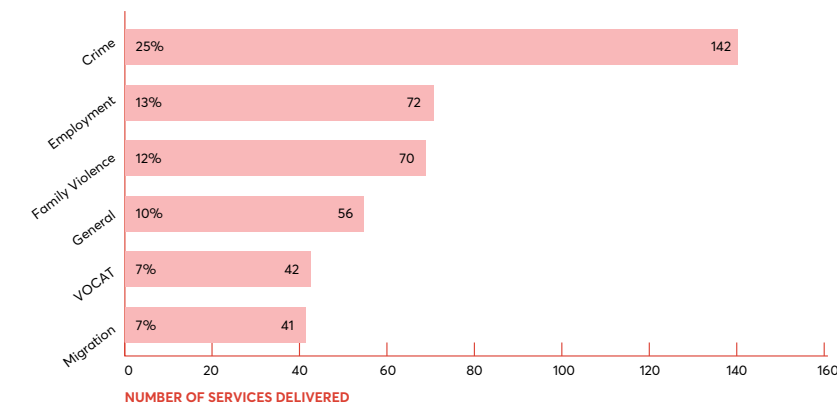
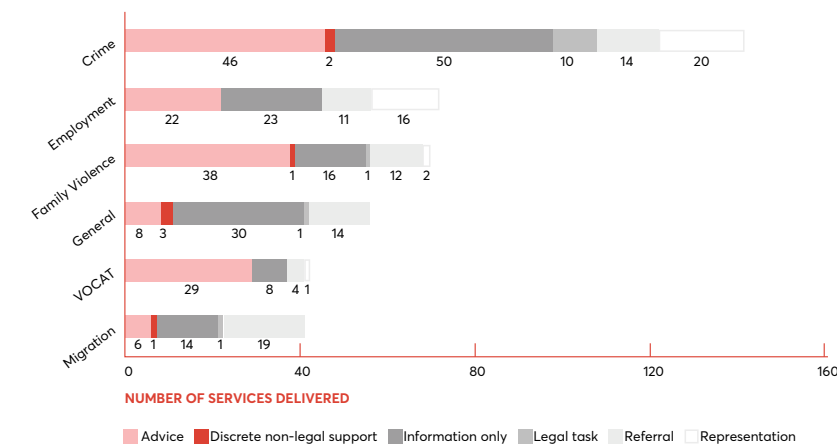


Figure 4: Main areas of law and type of assistance provided to students by SLP across two sites, 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2024; number of legal services provided



¹² The gender categories of non-binary and transgender have been merged with 'not specified' due to low numbers to reduce the risk of identification of any students.

⁷ In the Attorney-General's Department, National Legal Assistance Data Standards Manual version 3 (July 2021), 'legal assistance service' refers to both services for individuals (including information, advice, referral and representation) and services for the community (including legal education and law reform activities).

⁸ CLE activities are delivered to raise awareness and educate other service providers, community groups, organisations, schools, or the general community about the law and how to recognise, prevent and deal with legal problems. CLE Activities may be delivered through a variety of formats, including: workshops, presentations and meetings in person; web-based and electronic media.

⁹ A warm or facilitated referral involves the lawyer helping the student make contact with another individual or organisation for help. For example, the lawyer may phone the service they are referring the student to, to confirm their eligibility for assistance and make an appointment.

¹⁰ Legal information (35.2%, 50); Legal advice (32.4%, 46).

¹¹ Self-referral refers to students seeking help from the school lawyer on their own initiative. They might approach the school lawyer in person, by email or by phone.

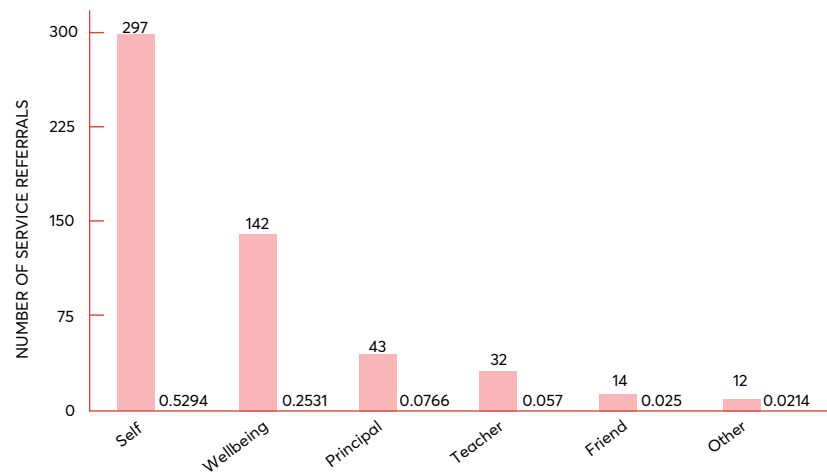


Figure 5: SLP referral sources across two sites, 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2024; number and percentage of referrals

2.1.2 Legal education

Community legal education, or legal education, raises awareness about the law and how to recognise, prevent and deal with legal problems. It is delivered by school lawyers in a range of formats including short presentations at school assemblies, interactive activities involving whole class groups, and small group workshops. Legal education is delivered as part of the schools' wellbeing support to students and is either proactive or responsive:

- **Proactive** refers to legal education sessions that are planned and scheduled well in advance of delivery. It addresses topics known to be of general relevance to secondary students, such as age of consent and work rights.
- **Responsive** refers to legal education sessions delivered upon request from the school and/or when an emerging issue is identified. It provides information about the law related to the specific issue that has occurred or is at risk of occurring (e.g. assault, group offending).

Between 1 July 2022 and 30 June 2024:

- **105 legal education** sessions were delivered, reaching more than **6,140 secondary students**¹³
 - 90 structured and 15 non-structured.¹⁴
- Main legal education **topics**:¹⁵
 - Bullying and cyber bullying – 42 sessions
 - Sexting – 19 sessions
 - Assault and group offending – 18 sessions
 - Work rights – 14 sessions
 - Consent and age of consent – 9 sessions.
- Legal education sessions were delivered to secondary students across all **year levels** (Years 7 through 12)

- At The Grange, Year 9 and 10 students received the most legal education sessions; additionally, 7 sessions were delivered at The Grange's primary school campus to students in Years 4/5/6.
- At WCC, most sessions were delivered to students in Years 7 and 8.
- Legal education was mainly delivered by school lawyers using Canva (approximately two thirds of sessions), otherwise using PowerPoint slides, or through informal discussion or board games.

2.2 OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

This section presents findings about outcomes produced by the SLP for students. It describes how the SLP impacted student knowledge, helped address their legal issues, how it empowered students, and how it supported improvements in health, wellbeing and school engagement.

2.2.1. Student Legal Knowledge

This evaluation found that both legal assistance and the various forms of legal education provided by the SLP has influenced student knowledge at a range of levels, notably:

- Deeper understanding of rights, responsibilities, laws and processes that apply to a specific legal problem a student is experiencing. This knowledge comes through legal assistance (i.e. 1:1 appointment for detailed legal information, legal advice and/or representation).
- Deeper understanding of the law, rights and responsibilities regarding a specific area of law relevant to students. This occurs through interactive legal education sessions (e.g. applying key principles to case studies, group activities) and 1:1 legal information appointments.

iii. Improved ability to recognise situations where legal assistance may be beneficial. This includes greater awareness of common scenarios for young people where the law is relevant and the ability to recognise "red flags" (indicators that legal help may be appropriate). This knowledge is developed through legal education in the form of presentations and interactive sessions and through 1:1 legal information and advice appointments.

iv. Greater understanding of basic legal information and key facts (e.g. age of consent, what constitutes cyberbullying). All legal education contributes to building this knowledge, along with informal legal chats and all 1:1 appointments with the school lawyer.

v. Greater awareness that the school lawyer service exists, the assistance offered and how to access it. This comes about through informal legal chats (e.g. in the school yard at recess), promotions (e.g. posters around the school) and all legal education sessions (as the school lawyer commences with an introduction explaining their role).

Of the 14 student clients who completed the legal feedback questionnaire for this evaluation (see Section 5.1.3) all reported that 1:1 consultation with the school lawyer helped them better understand their rights and/or responsibilities. Some clients reported learning from the lawyer about rights or responsibilities they were previously completely unaware of, while others obtained clarity and deeper understanding through speaking to the lawyer.

... Because I'm [a teenager], I didn't think that I was able to do anything to help, but it was really good learning about everything that I could do... And actually, I could do a lot in court and I didn't know that I could do that at my age."

- Student client

Similarly, students who received legal education reported learning new information or gaining a better understanding about their rights and the laws that affect them. Examples of new information learnt by students were in areas including employment law, bystander laws, and rights when approached by police.

She [school lawyer] taught us what to do if a cop ever approaches you and they're being aggressive, accusing you... just stay calm, don't say anything you don't mean. And she taught us how to respond to that kind of situation."

- Student non-client

We've learned a lot, especially ... about how something so simple as like a fight at the plaza could actually land you out of high school. Just being a bystander could cause you charges and stuff. And everyone was really surprised with that.

- Student non-client

Wellbeing staff reported that the school lawyer has particularly made a difference to student's understanding of employment law, bullying and sexting.

Bullying is never a funny thing and you can even go to jail."

- Student non-client (Legal education feedback)

"Sometimes if it's lunchtime, [the school lawyer will] be out in the broader space, just approaching some of our older kids, [asking] 'Are you working, are you planning on working? Do you understand where you can find information about your rights as an employee?' Or [after] hearing kids saying, 'I've been working until 3:00am last night', [asking] "Is that an expectation of your job? Do you know that you actually have choice and agency and it's not okay for somebody forcing those things?"

- Wellbeing staff

Students engaged in both longer and shorter legal education sessions. School lawyers explained that longer legal education sessions provide opportunity for them to facilitate activities that help students understand how particular laws apply in different situations. The focus of shorter sessions (e.g. presentations at school assemblies) is to share a small number of key facts to equip students to recognise when a situation has a legal dimension and to seek help.

¹³ Number of participants was not recorded for three sessions. Total estimate comprises 29 sessions to 983 students at The Grange, and 76 sessions to 5,159 students at WCC.

¹⁴ Non-structured includes legal education provided outside of classroom or school assembly settings, such as careers and sports events.

¹⁵ Some sessions addressed multiple topics.

When I do work rights stuff, I want [students] to walk away knowing that there is a minimum wage. I want them to walk away knowing that a boss cannot deduct money from your wages. So then when they go into the workforce and a boss is like, 'Hey, I'm going to deduct that money from your wage,' that little flick switches on [and says] 'Actually, I don't think that's right. I'm going to go seek legal advice on this before I agree.'"

– School lawyer

2.2.2 Student empowerment

This section presents findings about the extent to which the SLP has helped empower students to make decisions about their legal problems and equipped them to deal with emerging legal issues.

Empowered to make decisions

The evaluation found that the SLP has helped student clients feel more empowered to make decisions through both the type of information the lawyers provide and the way the lawyers provide support.

She helped me stand up for myself and what is right. Man I am so happy with her help. She stood up for me and help me get what I deserve."

– Student client (Feedback questionnaire)

"It keeps me more confident knowing that there's this person there that I can talk to if I have any other troubles and all the troubles I had before, I now know everything that I needed to know about them."

– Student client

"I didn't know what I was doing. For the lawyer to help me out was a big step for me... She basically went through what the programme was, how I can help myself from this happening again... She said that she wasn't forcing me to do anything. I can do

anything that I wanted, even get another lawyer if I wanted to.

[Interviewer: And if there wasn't a lawyer at school, what do you think you would've done about your legal problem?] Honestly, dunno. Probably go somewhere else for help.

[Interviewer: And do you know where to go?] No, not really. Besides school. That was the only place where I could really get help."

– Student Client

"It was a bit blinding without the knowledge that I needed, so having to talk to her and learn everything was really good. Without all the knowledge, you're kind of left in the dark. You don't really know what's going on. You can't have an idea, or you don't really know anything about it. So getting to tell her about everything, it's good to have some knowledge."

– Student client

All student clients who completed the feedback questionnaire reported that the school lawyer listened to them and treated them with respect, and all reported that they felt like the lawyer was on their side. Students reported feeling safe to speak to the school lawyer and confident that they would receive help without any judgment.

[The school lawyer] understood my issue from a personal level and didn't treat me like a child, she treated me with respect."

– Student client (Feedback questionnaire)

"Always 'no problem', no matter what happens, not judged when I told [the lawyer] about my legal issues."

– Student client

"The feeling that someone will be on your side."

– Student non-client

Several student clients described experiencing a sense of validation from being able to discuss their concerns with the school lawyer.

"I had an employment issue with payment... I didn't know if it was an actual legal issue. It was just something that I thought was bad. I started having friends tell me, 'oh, this might be an issue, talk to the school lawyer.' And so I got to speak to [them] and got to confirm, 'yeah, this is actually a legal issue. We can help you with this.' So it helped almost validate what I was going through because I didn't know if it was an actual issue or if I was just being picky."

– Student client

"I actually also have sat in on my friend's meeting and out of that situation my friend managed to get some issues with their boss at work sorted... that was very helpful and it actually made her realise, 'oh, I've actually really needed that help.' And it was suddenly a whole world of opportunities had opened up and it was like, 'oh, I actually can do more than I thought I could in this situation'."

– Student non-client

Student clients all reported that the school lawyer helped them understand the options available to address their legal problem, and many described how they felt supported to choose for themselves, without any pressure from the lawyer, if and/or how they wanted to proceed.

"Yes, [the school lawyer] gave great explanation. [They] explained all the steps and what choices I had. [They] helped me understand consequences to make better choices."

– Student client

"I spoke to [the school lawyer] and [they] said, 'look, you can definitely pursue this if you want, we can definitely help you, but it's up to you'... I wasn't sure if I needed to stop at one point or if I had to keep going. And

she was like, 'no, you can definitely stop. You don't have to keep going.' So I knew what I needed to do and there was never any confusion, 'what do I do from here?' She was definitely like, 'these are all your options. You can pick which path you want to go to'."

– Student client

All student clients who completed the feedback questionnaire reported feeling "100% confident" to return to the school lawyer for help with a legal question or problem, if they needed it.

"You're able to get the information that you need on a situation that you're in. And then if you're ever in trouble in the future, you can always get more information on that situation. So it's really good to have a school lawyer."

– Student client

School lawyers described how student confidence to seek help builds over time, as students become more familiar with the lawyer and more comfortable with what is involved in pursuing their rights.

"I've had some students just ask hypotheticals in the yard, and then sometimes they'll message me when something does crop up for them in their personal lives, like tenancy issues that their parents are going through, or Family law court matters that the young person is involved in, having to go through that process themselves and how they can understand that space better. So that was just a young person I spoke to randomly in the yard and then they've come back when something has come up for them... Once they get that information, they're feeling more empowered to do something."

– School lawyer

"Just being armed with the information is helpful. Even if they don't want to do anything about it – can't take the risk, don't want to do it right now. But we also see time and time again, them eventually come back

to us or come back to us in the employment context again, come back to us about the next job. 'I didn't do anything about that, but then I started this new job and I knew right away something wasn't right and now I've brought my payslip to [the school lawyer] so [they] can come check it.' And we do see those successes and sometimes we never see them again and that's fine. But at least they've got that knowledge, they've got that information and they can do with that what they will."

– School lawyer

Several stakeholders, including students and Wellbeing staff, highlighted that this confidence extends beyond the school lawyer and the student's time at secondary school. They described that students gain increased familiarity and comfort with lawyers as well as greater awareness of free legal services in the community, making them more likely to seek legal help when needed and when they are no longer students.

"For a lot of students [the SLP] gives them the tools and the resources so that when they leave school they know what to do and where to go... these kids may not have had a lot to do with [the school lawyer] while they were here, they may have run into them, may have been sitting there having lunch with Student Services and had an informal chat, may have caught up with them at careers day and done some roll of the dice thing to learn about employment law, that informal connection. And when they leave school, if they do need legal advice, then they know that Westjustice is the place that I spoke to those [school lawyers from] and they weren't that scary."

– Wellbeing staff

Equipped to deal with emerging legal issues

The school lawyers were able to deliver legal education in quick response to issues emerging at the schools, as a form of early intervention. Emerging issues are typically identified through discussions among Wellbeing staff and year level leads/teachers, and/or may be requested by school leadership. Targeted, legal education sessions were delivered in response to concerning behaviours identified at the schools, related to:

- Bullying
- Sexual harassment
- Assault/Group offending.

Feedback from students and staff at these targeted sessions has been positive, with approximately 90% of Year 10, 11 and 12 student attendants at a session on assault/group offending saying they learnt something useful. Year 8 student participants, in a case study activity about bullying, reported liking the session and learning things including "that bullying is extremely serious and the person bullying can even go to jail."

Wellbeing and teaching staff reported that responsive legal education provides a strong foundation for them to engage students in conversations about emerging issues in a timely manner and has contributed to some valuable behaviour change.

"We [delivered a comprehensive] programme last year that was targeted in response to an increase of online cyber bullying... Did we eliminate cyber bullying? No, we did not. But did we notice any changes? Yes. And some of those changes that I in particular notice is that when the kids come up and they say, 'oh, this has happened,' sometimes we can reflect on what we have learned and say, 'remember that thing that we did at the start of the year when [the school lawyer] got up to talk? What do we know? How can we respond if we feel like we are experiencing cyber bullying? What are the things that we can do if we are feeling disempowered by that? Do we need to talk to [the school lawyer]? Do we need to talk to the safety commission? Is this something that we can do through that process?' Or kids who are bullying, talking to them about 'you are making this choice to do that. Do you remember what the consequences could be if you did that?' So it's giving us a foundation. It's also giving teachers a foundation to engage in those conversations."

– Wellbeing staff

2.2.3 Student health and wellbeing

Feedback received from SLP participants through the process of this evaluation shows that the SLP has had a positive impact on student wellbeing. The school lawyers also described that legal assistance supports student clients' wellbeing, by helping them gain some control in their lives and move through situations where they have felt stuck and often hopeless.

All student clients (except one) who completed the feedback questionnaire reported that receiving help from the school lawyer made them feel less stressed or anxious, and relieved the distress of not knowing what to do, the worry about possible outcomes, or the stress of a legal problem continuing with no resolution in sight.

"[If there was no school lawyer] ...I would probably just be in a state of mental instability and just financially struggling. But now that all that has been concluded and solved, I've been working on myself fine and just been building up on it... it is a sense of panic when you don't know what to do. And just for when you're like, 'oh yeah, there's a school lawyer'. I was like, 'oh, phew'."

– Student client

"I was stressed and not sleeping worrying about going to jail. [Without the school lawyer's help] I would still be crying myself to sleep. Not stressed at all now... even though matter is still currently pending."

– Student client

"I didn't really have anywhere else to go. I didn't know what to do and then when I met [the school lawyer] they were able to help me make a plan and... it helped boost my motivation. It made me positive again."

– Student client

"[It was] really stressing me out... It was always in the back of my mind, but after I got it solved, I was just kind of like, 'you know what? I solved it. I did the best thing I could. I've gotten confirmation from somebody who's a professional in that area, it's been handled and I don't need to think about it anymore.'"

– Student client

School lawyers noted that student clients are usually receiving support from other members of the Wellbeing team (e.g. student counsellors) or, if there is a need, the school lawyer will refer them, and/or provide referral pathways to support services outside the school.

"We have an important role to contribute to that space, because normally when there are legal issues... there's usually a deficit happening somewhere as well. And so when we deliver that advice or that information to the young person, we do a bit of a mental checklist to see what else is going on in their lives... I have direct relationships with services where I can just go, 'oh, you're not getting food at home... You're paying out of pocket where you don't have money. So let me get you connected to someone at the Youth Resource Centre where they can provide free groceries every week for you. Are you OK with that?' And then I'll provide that warm referral over to them. So sometimes it's not even legal based support. It's more holistic support, young person rocking up to school with holes in their shoes. You know, I've got a connection for that... And that referral process, having it come from someone that they know is a reputable source. It does help break those barriers a little bit."

– School lawyer

One school lawyer noted that where a student already has a lawyer assigned, they can still provide information and support to that student that the assigned lawyer does not have time to provide, thereby rounding out the overall support that student has and enhancing their wellbeing.

“There have been a couple of matters where the young person... already had a Victoria Legal Aid lawyer assigned, or they’ve had a Child Protection lawyer assigned, so there’s not much work we can do in that space. But we still provide them with information and support that their lawyers don’t necessarily always have the time to and so in that respect, even though we’re not acting for them, we’re still a very important source for their mental health while they’re going through this. And because we have that engagement with them, referral pathways to support services, it’s always easier to, I guess, sell [that additional support] to the young person.”

– School lawyer

Wellbeing staff likewise observed that access to support from the school lawyer contributes positively to student wellbeing.

“Being able to talk it out with a lawyer and realise that you’re not in as deep a dungeon as you thought you were... I think that student wellbeing is better in the sense that they know that there is someone that’s going to listen to them and hear them and not be judgmental.

2.2.4 Student legal issues addressed

School lawyers have supported student clients to address a range of legal issues in a variety of ways, including:

- Assisting with waiver of Myki (public transport) fines
- Providing advice on employment law (e.g. underpayments, entitlements) which has equipped students to make an informed choice about how to proceed, including whether to self-advocate, do nothing, or lodge a formal complaint
- Representing student clients with criminal matters and helping them avoid recording of a criminal conviction
- Supporting participation in the Work and Development Permit Scheme, which provides non-financial options for addressing fines, including regular school attendance (see Section 2.2.5).
- In citizenship issues, by helping students complete the necessary paperwork and connecting them to the VLA ‘Youth Citizenship in the West Project’.¹⁶

“We’ve had pretty good positive court matters resolved for young people... keeping them away from a criminal record, resolving the matter, and having them come out on the other side feeling comfortable and confident with the process and how it all resulted.”

– School lawyer

The following case study shows the impacts legal assistance for fines and non-payment of wages can have for students.

CASE STUDY 1:

Resolving employment problems and fines supports housing stability and school engagement

Arthur* came to the SLP as an 18-year-old student. He sought help for several issues, the most pertinent being the non-payment of his wages while working at a children’s party centre.

Arthur and his employer had a verbal agreement regarding how much he should be paid, which was below the minimum wage for an 18-year-old casual employee on an introductory rate. After being employed for a few months, Arthur had received no wages at all and his brief employment period was ended after baseless accusations of theft from the employer.

Together, Arthur and the school lawyer developed an advocacy plan, whereby they approached the employer together seeking Arthur’s employment records so they could calculate how much Arthur was owed. They worked to negotiate a full and final settlement with the employer, in which Arthur was back-paid a substantial amount for the hours he had worked, and the employer agreed not to pursue the alleged theft.

Whilst speaking to Arthur about his employment situation, the school lawyer conducted a legal health check and through that process, discovered Arthur had an outstanding Department of Transport fine. The school lawyer explained the options available to Arthur and how he could approach this situation. Arthur was very grateful for the information as this was his first fine and he didn’t know what to do – he had been trying to save up to pay for it when he was fired! After some discussion, Arthur and the school lawyer together wrote a letter to Fines Victoria requesting a waiver of the fine under the At Risk Youth Program, to avoid Arthur being placed under further financial strain as a full-time student without ongoing employment.

This overall outcome had a significant impact on Arthur and his family, who were facing severe financial hardship as a result of the ongoing cost of living crisis. Arthur was able to co-advocate with support, and did not need to drop out of school to work so that he could support his parent and siblings. Arthur is now in his final term of year 12, and on track to graduate while remaining living at home.

* Not the student’s real name.

2.2.5 School engagement

Evaluation participants shared numerous examples of ways the SLP has helped improve student engagement.

For some students experiencing legal issues, the associated stress can interfere with their ability to engage in class learning, and sometimes be a barrier to attending school at all.

“Previously thought I would go to jail. Was very stressed, Not attending school, couldn’t sleep.”

– Student client

“The legal issue was definitely a distraction for me in class as much as I tried to avoid it. But it was just thoughts always come into play. And so now we’re bit over and done with. I pretty much had just forgotten about the case and I’ve been working positively on my work.”

– Student client

“You could see prior to this student talking to the school lawyers, they were just so miserable, so upset because they knew that there was something going to happen, but I feel like they were at ease, they were able to go back into the classes and do work, whereas before it was just consuming their mind... They didn’t have representation. Their parents weren’t able to afford that.”

– Wellbeing staff

A STUDENT IS ENGAGED WHEN THEY:

- Participate in all areas of the school including academic, social and extracurricular activities (**behavioural engagement**)
- Feel included in the school and has feelings of belonging to the school (**emotional engagement**)
- Are personally invested in and take ownership of their learning (**cognitive engagement**).

A range of factors contribute to engagement, including student, teacher, school, curriculum and resources, and family and community factors.

(Adapted from the Victorian Department of Education resource on student engagement: *Identifying students at risk of disengaging*)

¹⁶ Youth Citizenship in the West Project: <https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/strengthening-paths-citizenship>

School lawyers reported that they have opportunities to encourage student clients to engage at school. In some instances, it would be beneficial in a student client's legal matter for the lawyer to be able to show the student is attending school, while for other students, the relationship and ongoing communication with the school lawyer provide opportunities for gentle reminders and encouragement.

"If they've got ongoing matters then I've got a strong communication open with them and so then I can have those conversations like, 'what's going on with school? Are you coming?' Especially if they've got court matters going on, [explaining] 'look, you need to be engaged somewhere with something. I don't care what it is, but the school's told me they're going to kick you out if you don't start coming. But what do you want to do? You can make the decision, is it come back or is it enrol somewhere else? I can go chat to the enrolment person and we can make that happen.' I can then hand that over so I'm staying in my lane, but we are giving that student [some support]."

– School lawyer

School principals described that students working to help support their families, a common situation in the demographic region, can be particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Examples were shared of students being required to work until after midnight and threatened with losing their job if they objected, and consequently being unable to engage at school. The SLP's work in the employment space has helped students understand their rights as employees and in some instances, school lawyers were able to help student clients self-advocate for better work conditions

"There is that need for my kids to work and support families. So there is also the opportunity to get some of that information through the school lawyer programme, that people can't make kids work until 2am ... and threaten their jobs on top of that sort of stuff. That's the vulnerability that I have in my community that I think the school lawyer programme really does make a difference

[to]. That's a cycle for disengagement. That's a cycle for not being able to get to school, not being able to do their work."

– School Principal

The evaluation also heard that for some students, access to legal support is the main reason they attend school when they have a legal problem, and when they do, the Wellbeing team has a greater opportunity to offer broader assistance to help support that student to re-engage with their education.

"We have kids who I don't think would come to school without access to legal advice. I think that is the reason, that's what brings them into school. We then work at keeping them at school and trying to engage them in class. Sometimes getting kids through those gates is really hard and access to legal advice when you've got legal problems, but also access to nonjudgmental consistent, same person, rapport-driven legal support is huge."

– Wellbeing staff

Westjustice, through the SLP, has connected one of the schools to the Victorian Department of Justice & Community Safety's 'Work and Development Permit' scheme and the school has become and accredited WDP provider. The other school was also introduced to this scheme and are in the process of becoming accredited. This scheme enables students to address fine debts by attending school, providing strong motivation for regular school attendance. It also reduces the financial burden for families of having to pay fine debts.

"We have students who have then been able to attend school to work off their fines that may not have actually attended school otherwise. It's been twofold for the school as it has meant that kids and families who couldn't afford to pay those fines in the first place didn't rack up additional debt but has also worked in favour of our attendance data as a school because it's helped engagement in education."

– Wellbeing staff

The SLP has also increased the opportunity for numerous refugee and migrant students to engage in tertiary studies. Students who are not Australian citizens must pay full university fees which, for most students in that situation in the region, poses a complete barrier. By linking migrant and refugee students to VLA and Westjustice's 'Youth Citizenship in the West Project', many have obtained citizenship and are now eligible for reduced university fees, thereby increasing the likelihood of them accessing further education.

2.3 OUTCOMES FOR SCHOOLS

This section presents findings about the difference the SLP makes for schools. It describes how the SLP impacts the wellbeing support and education that schools provide and the legal knowledge of staff.

2.3.1 Holistic wellbeing support

School staff and Westjustice stakeholders all spoke about how the SLP strengthened the amount and breadth of holistic support options (including education) offered by the school.

"I think it makes it a stronger team, having a lawyer on site... it adds a new dynamic to our Student Services team and Wellbeing team. And I think that in terms of holistic support for the students, a lawyer really adds another layer to that, that I think is important."

– Wellbeing staff

"It gives an extra layer of support and resources to probably the most vulnerable of the cohorts here."

– School Principal

Wellbeing staff and lawyers described that they refer to one another when they identify that a student has legal or socioemotional needs, respectively, thereby giving students access to more comprehensive support to addresses the different dimensions of the issues they are experiencing. Both groups also reported that they can collaborate and coordinate to some extent (i.e. within confidentiality boundaries) enabling more comprehensive support overall.

"I think the way that we're placed into Wellbeing has some really good effects. It can be very holistic in nature. If young people go to the school counsellors about maybe something's going on at home and then the school counsellors can refer them to me for practical legal help. And then we often do a lot of work together in so far as client confidentiality will allow, to support that student. And I think it has some really, really good effects and helps students get good advice from the experts... You get a lot of people tell you about lots of really awful things that are going on. And it's great for me to be able to [ask], 'have you spoken to... [a school] counsellor about this?' But encouraging them to go to the right person and then me being ... able to stick to my lane but also make sure they have somewhere else they can go... it's all helping each other to do more of a wraparound."

– School lawyer

"Now when we identify that somebody might be going down that path to access [financial assistance from VOCAT], we can then also align and... make sure that we have access to resources that can support the legal process around that... [applications] usually require a psychologist assessment... we have an arrangement with an external psychology service [and can] pay for the sessions for the psychologist externally to do the report to support [the application]... So it's allowed us to refine our systems and expand and refine our suite of services."

– Wellbeing staff

“I feel like the system is really comprehensive. I think the biggest benefit... is if it comes to legal stuff, it’s not something staff can easily work on [for] these kids because we have limited knowledge about that. So if that’s the case... we can make potential referral to [the school lawyer] and better support these kids who need this.”

– Wellbeing staff

Several evaluation participants, including one student, described that by teaching students about their rights and helping them understand the relevance of the law to different facets of life, the school lawyer helps better prepare students for adulthood.

“For the school to have the option to have a lawyer on standby, in my opinion is, one of the greatest ideas that they have brought into a high school, since they got to help teach these kids to become adults.”

– Student non-client

“It’s also important for [students] to understand their legal rights as well as responsibilities, particularly around employment law, use of money, finances, rental agreements, and how to access legal support. Whether you agree with it or disagree, the law surrounds everybody, so it’s critical that kids understand that and having a real person in the school representing that is fabulous.”

– School Principal

The evaluation also found that the SLP has helped both The Grange and WCC form a strong connection to their local community legal service, Westjustice, and consequently to other programs that students and their families have accessed for assistance (e.g. VLA’s Citizenship Project, Visy Care Hub).

2.3.2 Access to proactive and responsive legal education

The evaluation found that the SLP successfully offered both proactive legal education and responsive legal education, equipping students with information across a range of relevant legal topics. Both proactive and responsive legal education play a role in preventing legal issues for students.

Proactive legal education

The school lawyers work with year level leaders and teachers to identify opportunities in the teaching schedule to book legal education sessions on topics of known importance to students, such as bullying or employment law (targeted at students 15 years and older). This has also enabled delivery of content such as ‘Respectful Relationships’ and short sessions for other curriculum topics, like legal studies.

Addressing emerging legal issues

The SLP delivers responsive legal education that addresses emerging legal issues in a timely manner.

All school staff and school lawyers described that emerging legal issues are identified in a range of ways. This might include:

- Wellbeing staff (including school lawyers), either individually or collaboratively, observe an emerging trend in issues being experienced by the students they are helping
- Year level leaders observe particular issues among the year levels they oversee
- Through staff meetings of the wider teaching body, it becomes apparent there is a new concern developing.

School lawyers reported that they actively seek opportunities to identify and respond to emerging issues and also respond to requests for education on issues identified by other staff across the wider teaching body.

“We make a point of finding time in the staff meetings... listening to what issues are coming through the school.”

– School lawyer

“If we do see a trend of certain things based on the incidents that occurred in our school, we might potentially arrange a workshop around a certain topic like cyber bullying,

consent and all of that. So everyone can benefit from it, not only a specific or certain group, but for all the students across different years levels.”

– Wellbeing staff

The evaluation heard that key strengths of the legal education delivered by the school lawyers are that it can be delivered as soon as an emerging issue is identified, and that it is highly tailored to the student audience and their specific needs. Responsive education on emerging legal issues has ranged from brief presentations to a suite of interventions, including comprehensive, interactive workshops. The school lawyers tailor the depth of content, the language used and the delivery format.

“...In response to an increase of online cyber bullying... we identified the issue and then worked collaboratively with Wellbeing, the Year 7 leadership team and [the school lawyer] around developing an education programme for us that we then co-facilitated with the teachers. So what that looked like – we did an assembly around bullying and cyber bullying. We had, prior to that, done education sessions with... all Year 7... homeroom[s]. And [the school lawyer] developed a lesson plan to go alongside to that assembly. We had trained the teachers to deliver that lesson plan... And we had Wellbeing people and [the school lawyer] doing pop-ins to support teachers... It was amazing. And so through that we meet kids, we upskill teachers, we educate kids on Westjustice indirectly, and it’s responding to an identified issue.”

– Wellbeing staff

“There were some [sexual harassment] incidences happening at the school and the teachers asked me to provide a bit of a legal standpoint on some of that behaviour and because there were some known victims and perpetrators in amongst the cohort, the teachers asked me to separate it between males and females... we decided that that was appropriate for some of the victims in

the other groups, so that we can focus a little bit more on victim support in that space and removing some of that shame.”

– School lawyer

“They’ve come in over the last three years and done an assembly and they always ask me ‘what’s the need of the cohort at the moment?’ And we’ve done things like fair work, fair wages, sexting, all that sort of stuff that really hits that teenager demographic, but also sensitive to the socioeconomic needs of the area, because we’ve had a lot of kids who are obviously helping out with bills at home and kids who might be in out-of-home-care.”

– Teacher

One school lawyer noted the importance of having a teacher present during legal education sessions to help students understand that, while the lawyer is part of the school, their role and responsibilities are distinct from those of teachers (see also Section 2.4.5).

2.3.3 Staff legal knowledge

Both teachers and Wellbeing staff reported that through the school lawyer, they have gained better understanding of the rights and laws commonly affecting students. This has come about through staff being present at student legal education sessions delivered by the school lawyer, through secondary consultations,¹⁸ and to a lesser extent through legal education sessions for staff.

“[The school lawyer] has been really instrumental in my understanding of employment law and young people’s rights with employment.”

– Wellbeing staff

“[The school lawyer] has always been very, very, very open to secondary consult with staff in the Wellbeing team. So it has meant that even if we are not sure if something is legal or there’s anything that they can support with, we have been able to pick their brains.”

– Wellbeing staff

¹⁸ A secondary consultation is the provision of information to an allied professional (e.g. social worker, counsellor) regarding an issue experienced by someone they are supporting. It helps the allied professional identify whether the person they are supporting is experiencing a legal problem and provides them with legal information that they can pass on.

The evaluation found greater confidence among Wellbeing staff to seek and share legal information with students (and families/carers of their students), due to their interactions with the SLP (e.g. informal discussions, secondary consultations, collaboratively delivering wellbeing education).

“We’re not giving advice through the teachers but we’re trying to educate them about what the law says and then what they need to do... I think a lot of teachers really appreciate this because they don’t know, they’re not experts... And if there’s problems with fighting or filming fights at school, arming teachers with knowledge of what the law says to then better be able to pass on information to the young people.”

– School lawyer

“I know myself, it’s been really helpful when parents have come to see me, we’ve had a few students that have been in accidents, so they’ve had ambulance fees and things like that. So they’ve all of a sudden [received] an \$1,800 bill and of course a lot of them are non-English speaking, so they immediately freak. So I was able to come to the lawyer and talk to the lawyer and get information [about] where we stood, what we could do, how we could move forward for this family.”

– Wellbeing staff

“I think [the teachers are] better. It used to be a very grey area where it was always ‘go to Student Services, go to the lawyer, go to this person’ where now they’re starting to actually have a bit of a conversation prior because a lot of knowledge is out there and... [they] can at least help little bit.”

– School lawyer.

School lawyers reported observing a growing ability among Wellbeing and teaching staff to identify when students have legal issues and may benefit from speaking to them.

“[Equipping teachers to] issue spot things, so when they hear conversations in the yard like ‘oh, my boss is so dodgy’ or ‘I’ve got another fine’, they [recognise] that’s a school lawyer thing... And a lot of the teachers spend a lot of time with their kids and have good rapport with the kids, and I get quite a few referrals where [the student says] ‘oh Mr. Whoever told me to come chat to you about this.’”

– School lawyer

2.3.4 Enhanced curriculum

The SLP strengthens the schools’ Tier 1 interventions to support student mental health and wellbeing, by delivering tailored legal education at year and classroom level that addresses key topics noted by the Victorian Department of Education, including bullying prevention, and alcohol and drug education.

In addition to creating bespoke educational pieces, the evaluation also heard from several stakeholders that the school lawyer has helped enhance the delivery and impact of existing curriculum, by providing expert knowledge on the legal facets of some content (e.g. Respectful Relationships).

“The school lawyer meets with the year level leaders too, to talk about how they can complement the curriculum... when they’re talking about things like consent or respectful relationships, that’s something that we have used the school lawyer to support, to be an expert speaker in that space. This is part of the core curriculum and it’s like, ‘oh, [the school lawyer] would be great for this!’ And so they come into the classroom.”

– Wellbeing staff

TIER 1: SCHOOL-WIDE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING PROMOTION

Tier 1 Universal interventions help schools to create a positive, inclusive and supportive school climate, building the preconditions for optimal student learning, development and wellbeing. They are the initiatives and programs schools adopt that are good for all students.

Schools can support students to develop:

- social and emotional skills and capabilities that promote life-long mental health and wellbeing
- skills to problem-solve and manage the normal stressors of life
- healthy relationships and the ability to work cooperatively with others
- a sense of autonomy and purpose.

It was reported by school staff that the collaboration between the lawyer and teachers or Wellbeing staff, to deliver content on topics with a legal dimension (e.g. consent, bullying), made the messages more impactful.

“It’s given the Wellbeing people an extra dimension to their work. While they can talk about interventions... and talk about how to behave...we can add that [legal dimension] to the repertoire of getting kids to consider what their behaviours, interactions, relationships are like. And it’s been incredibly powerful around consent... kids have to understand that it’s a legal responsibility, to understand the boundaries within relationships.”

– School Principal

“I’ve been working closer [with the] health promotion nurse and doing a lot more proactive work in risky behaviour stuff... I’m finding that they’re reaching out to me, asking legal questions, if I can’t attend I’ll

create a few slides for them to add in. Like the one that we’re doing soon on sexting and the mental harm that can cause. I’m not a health specialist, so then I’m leaving that mental harm space to the nurse and I’m only focusing on the legal component of it.”

– School lawyer

2.4 PROGRAM ENABLERS

Evaluation participants shared insights about factors that support the delivery and effectiveness of the SLP, ranging from overall suitability of the school lawyer, their physical accessibility, confidentiality of the services they provide, and the fact that they are integrated with the school yet independent in key ways. These factors support legal help-seeking by students and engagement with legal education and legal assistance.

Most of the following factors are enablers of both the legal assistance and legal education components of the program; where an enabler is relevant to only one component, this is noted.

2.4.1 School lawyer skills and attributes

The evaluation identified a range of skills and attributes important for school lawyers to be effective in school settings. The following were reported as essential across the range of evaluation participants:

- Personal qualities: being friendly, approachable, respectful, caring, non-judgemental, curious and flexible
- Ability to communicate effectively with young people
- Ability to rapidly build rapport and trust with young people, noting that rapport and trust also increase over time as students grow more familiar with the school lawyer
- Knowledge and experience in areas of law relevant to young people
- Sufficiently young to be considered relatable by adolescents
- Ability to balance professional demeanour and approachability.

The following quotes highlight some of the features identified by student clients and staff that contributed to a positive experience with the school lawyer.

“How easy it was to explain my feelings & how able I was to get my point across.”

– Student client (Feedback questionnaire)

“She understood my issue from a personal level and didn’t treat me like a child, she treated me with respect.”

– Student client (Feedback questionnaire)

“They were very easy to talk to, mainly because they’re around my age, and so we’re able to have a sense of relatability and also understand modern time issues.”

– Student client

“I liked that [the school lawyer] was kind of close to us in age. It was really easy to approach her. I didn’t feel very stressed out or overwhelmed. She wasn’t scary or mean or anything. She was really welcoming and friendly, so that made it really easy.”

– Student client

“The [school lawyers] build rapport very quickly. They’re curious and they don’t speak down to kids... They allow the kids to be the expert.

– Wellbeing staff

2.4.2 Accessibility and office location

The evaluation found that the accessibility of the school lawyer was key to students seeking legal assistance and made it easier for staff to confidently refer students for help.

Students and staff noted that it was easy to speak to the school lawyer because the lawyer is on-site, usually attends school the same day(s) each week and is contactable by email and mobile phone. School lawyers were described as having an “open door policy” (except when meeting with students), making it easier for students to speak to them.

“I do know that if I needed to say something out of school, I can get her by phone or email.”

– Student client

“There’s so many little laws... and it’s easy to break them, so it’s really helpful to have a lawyer at our school, what’s close by and what’s really friendly.”

– Student non-client

“Just the fact that I am able to immediately say ‘[the school lawyer] is here on Wednesday, let’s send her a message or you can message her on Teams.’ Her work number’s posted there for them to access or I can find it and give it to them. Really the accessibility is the main thing that I value.”

– Wellbeing Staff

Several stakeholders noted that students feel safe to access help because the service is provided within the familiarity of school grounds. Students and staff both noted that seeking legal help off-site would be too daunting or difficult (if not impossible) for many students, especially younger students.

“It’s less scary. I don’t know if a lot of kids would want to go to Westjustice... and try & speak to someone. I don’t think I would’ve had the time or the ability to go down and speak to somebody externally. That’s why if it wasn’t for the school, I would’ve just left it alone. Nothing would’ve happened..”

– Student client

“If someone had a problem, then I guess it’s easier to just come to school than actually have to go and seek out a lawyer. I guess it’s less scary ... if you know who the lawyer is and if they’re accessible at the school.”

– Student non-client

Consistent time on-site was noted by several evaluation participants as important for building trust and for students to know when and how to access legal assistance.

“It is all about consistency and showing up, being there for those little questions, because that’s what leads to the bigger questions... It’s really important to have that in-person exposure to the young person. Like, I do the Breakfast Club¹⁹ & a lot of them know me that way.”

– School lawyer

2.4.3 Legal confidentiality

All evaluation participants noted that when students understand legal confidentiality²⁰, they feel safer and more confident to seek assistance from the school lawyer and share personal information.

“Can talk to someone you trust, about legal stuff... not part of school, can talk about anything.”

– Student client

Students were more likely to take up a referral to speak to the school lawyer if they understood legal confidentiality, noting that this requires both clear explanation and reassurance from the school lawyer and school staff.

“Being really clear about the process & advertis[ing] the confidentiality... has supported them [students] going.”

– School Principal

“I think the school communicated it really well, saying that it was very safe and confidential, so it made it not seem too embarrassing or stressful of a situation to approach.”

– Student client

The evaluation found that when students understand legal confidentiality, it can enhance or be a foundation for building rapport and trust.

“For the first [appointment] it was a bit confronting not knowing what’s going to happen if I say the wrong thing or this and

that. But once you get there and once you meet [them], it’s a lot easier to talk about it. She assured me that whatever you say, if it’s not harmful to someone or no one’s going to be in harm, that it’s just between you and her... Once I heard the confidentiality about it, I could get everything off my chest.”

– Student client

“What I like as well is the student doesn’t feel like they have to tell me what’s going on in there [with school lawyer consultations]. They know that it’s confidential. And even if they [say] ‘oh, I spoke to [the school lawyer], I say] ‘that’s between you two. You don’t have to tell me anything.’ So I feel like they feel safe as well because they’re like, ‘well, actually the teachers don’t know’.”

– Wellbeing staff

2.4.4 Integrated but independent role

Stakeholders reported that the Wellbeing team was the best place for the school lawyer to sit, both physically and in terms of school structure. This supported accessibility by both students and staff and made it easier for Wellbeing staff and the school lawyer to work collaboratively.

“Proximity makes a difference. [When] all the Wellbeing people work in one hub, they have that communication channel constantly open and you can see who’s coming in and you can kind of overhear what problems are coming through.”

– School lawyer

¹⁹ School Breakfast Clubs provide free, nutritious for students before school. School staff may volunteer to prepare food (e.g. cut up fruit) and supervise.

²⁰ Legal confidentiality requires lawyers not to share client information unless the client gives their permission. For example, lawyers must keep confidential disclosures of child physical abuse that other types of professionals (e.g. school counsellors, teachers) are legally required to report to child protection authorities.

The evaluation also found that when there is a single location for Wellbeing services, and the school lawyer has an office there, they have greater exposure to “foot traffic”.

“What works best is [a] central model [where]... literally every single person that goes through Wellbeing will walk past the school lawyer.”

– Program Manager

Stakeholders noted that while it is important for the school lawyer to be well integrated, it is also critical that they are seen as independent of the school. The school lawyer needs strong relationships with Wellbeing and other school staff in order to do their work, but there needs to be both actual and perceived independence from the school so that students feel safe and confident to access legal assistance.

“They’re part of the school and they support the school but are a separate entity.”

– Teacher

“The way that they’re embedded into the Wellbeing team... [It’s] sort of like an external partner doing their business within our school, but not one of the [Wellbeing] team. But it feels like the school lawyer is part of the [Wellbeing] team.”

– Wellbeing staff

“There is value in our making it really clear we are not staff, we are not The Grange, we’re not Wyndham Central, we’re separate, we’re a legal service. We don’t have the same rules while also there is benefit to that we’re not a teacher... I’m not giving you detention... we try and be separate, we also try and be Wellbeing as well.”

– Program Manager

2.4.5 Other enabling factors

In addition to the factors described above, the evaluation found the following enabling factors helpful to the SLP’s success:

- Positive student attitudes to seeking and utilising support from Wellbeing team
- Word of mouth referrals by students who have accessed legal assistance from the SLP
- Regular promotion of the SLP in a variety of ways, including announcements, posts on Microsoft Teams, and posters around the school
- Easy referral process: While school lawyers do not have access to school systems such as Compass, Wellbeing and other school staff find it easy to refer students via email or phone call. Students can self-refer by approaching the school lawyer in-person, by phone or via email.
- Role clarity: When school staff clearly understand the nature, scope and purpose of the school lawyer role, they can make appropriate referrals and avail themselves of legal education opportunities. Role clarity is provided through a combination of the memorandum of understanding between Westjustice and the schools, support and promotion of the SLP by principals and other senior leadership, and ongoing awareness raising and relationship building by the school lawyer.
- Relationships: Strong relationships between school lawyers and key staff enable referrals and delivery of legal education. School lawyers reported that they need to continuously undertake relationship-building activities, ranging from general mingling with staff to participating in school activities (e.g. Breakfast Club, Careers Day, Sports Day). This was noted as particularly important in large schools with high staff turnover.

“There’s got to be clarity around the role & the relationship with the school. There’s got to be a strong connection between principal, class leadership and support of the program. And then there has to be the interpersonal relationships between the school lawyer and the key people they’re working with, [that is,] Wellbeing team and year level leaders.”

– School Principal

- Teachers hosting/overseeing legal education sessions: When school lawyers can rely on teachers to maintain order and address any behaviour problems during legal education sessions, it reinforces that the SLP is independent of the school and separate from any disciplinary processes.

“I find predominantly the year 9s and 10s tend to push back a little bit more depending on the content, and they’re a little bit more [distracted]... and that’s where it’s really important to have teachers there to bring them back in because our job isn’t to discipline the students. We don’t want to be an enforcer in that space. We have to remain as neutral as possible, so the students feel comfortable coming to us.”

– School lawyer

- School Lawyer Reference Group²¹: Meetings of this national group of school lawyers provide opportunities to discuss and work through challenges and strategic approaches to delivering the SLP.
- Training for school lawyers: Equipping lawyers with the soft skills needed to engage young people and to deliver legal education in engaging ways (i.e. having a teacher train lawyers in teaching skills and/or collaborating with them to develop education sessions).
- Westjustice’s Youth Law Program model: School lawyers are part of the Youth Law team who work on a range of different youth programs. This provides them opportunities to develop and maintain a range of skills and knowledge that may not be used so often in the school setting but are still important for their role (e.g. representation). It also supports regular interaction with colleagues working with similar clients, thereby helping prevent feelings of isolation that may arise from being the only legal practitioner in a school.

2.5 PROGRAM CHALLENGES

Stakeholders identified several challenges that hinder the SLP, including feedback from both students and staff regarding students’ attitudes toward help-seeking. Additionally, among those who do seek assistance, some are reluctant to take action, which limits the legal outcomes that can be achieved. All evaluation participants also reported that the number of days the lawyer spends onsite constrains the amount of legal education and assistance that can be delivered.

2.5.1 Student attitudes to help-seeking

Some students have negative attitudes towards lawyers and/or misunderstand the role of lawyers, despite the ongoing relationship building and education work of the school lawyers.

“The stigma of being a lawyer, even though I do so much work to be out there and talk to young people, I still get questions of like, ‘oh, but you are like a cop, aren’t you?’... we’re conflated with the criminal justice system. We are conflated with cops and the court and they’re like, ‘well, I can’t tell you about crimes that I committed.’ I [explain]... ‘I don’t want you to self-incriminate because I’ve very strong ethical duties to the court and I can’t lie if you tell me you’re guilty... but I’m not a cop, I can’t punish you. I’m not a decision maker. I’m here to help you advocate for yourself in what can be a very tricky, complicated system and an unfair one. So I want to make sure you are getting the fairest outcome. That is literally my role’. And there’s a lot of that [attitude among students].”

– School lawyer

“I know some kids were like, ‘I don’t want to do that [approach a school lawyer]. That’s embarrassing. People are going to make fun of me for it.’”

– Student client

²¹ The role of the School Lawyer Reference Group is to strengthen and develop the School Lawyer model thinking and practice in the non-profit, government and private sectors. The group meets quarterly and includes members from across most of Australia, though most participants are from Victoria where the SLP began.

Students interviewed for the evaluation described that some students won't speak to the school lawyer as they don't see the value of talking to a lawyer, while some are deterred by the attitudes of their friends toward seeking help from the Wellbeing team.

"I think some kids might kind of be like, 'it's a bit scary to go do that, or is it actually going to help me?' Not so much the actual lawyer, but the mindset around going to the lawyer, if that makes sense. But just telling kids that if your friends are going to say something negative about you seeking help, maybe that's the problem. Not you needing assistance with something, because there's nothing wrong with seeking the assistance. But I think a lot of kids don't realise that it's okay to go and use the school lawyer and the resources that they have there."

– Student Client

It was also noted that the practice of Wellbeing staff pulling students out of class was off-putting for those who don't want their peers to know they are receiving help. One school lawyer noted that they will ask students if they are comfortable for the lawyer to collect them from class, ask which class they prefer to be collected from, and also let students know that their meeting with the school lawyer will be documented in their attendance record as seeing Wellbeing. Some students may be unaware of this extra care taken by the lawyer to maintain their privacy and assume that the lawyer will collect them from class in the same undesirable way that some other Wellbeing staff do.

"I think it's actually less judgement when you walk up here yourself than when... one of the Wellbeing members comes and knocks at class, 'can I steal this person for a bit?' That's more embarrassing than it is walking up and just knocking on the door personally... When the school counsellor comes, and picks 'em up, I've seen kids go very shy and very often like, 'oh, I wasn't expecting that me talking to the counsellor to be advertised to everyone'"

– Student non-client

2.5.2 Time on-site, at large schools

The evaluation found that school lawyers find it challenging to achieve their preferred level of foundational work for providing legal assistance and legal education (proactive and responsive), when only on-site one or two days per week. Foundational work includes:

- Maintaining awareness of the service offerings among the student and teaching bodies
- Building/maintaining relationships with key staff (i.e. Wellbeing and year level leaders)
- Developing trust and rapport with students and staff
- Deepening understanding of the SLP among students and staff.

"When you're here full-time, you develop a different dynamic with kids... [there's] much broader exposure."

– School Principal

"Two days both feels like a lot and not enough. I am really busy all two days. I don't have breaks. Everybody makes comments on how busy I am, and I am, but yet there's still more to do. There's always more people to see. There's always more teachers to chat to". – School lawyer

The evaluation also found that the less time the lawyer is on-site, the more difficult it can be for staff and students to find convenient times to meet with the school lawyer.

"I've had students ask if I can come in more than one day a week and even some of the staff members because they would find it helpful to have an easier schedule to access."

– School lawyer

"Sometimes I do have to wait [for an appointment] just because they have a schedule, they need to stick to those times. But then I also have a schedule and I need to stick to those times. So we kind of find a way around that and agree on a meeting point. So it's not too difficult, but at the same time,

there is a little bit of struggle to try and find the perfect day."

– Student client

These challenges are amplified by the large size of the schools, with approximately 1,800 to 2,000 students at each site included in the evaluation and 150 to 200 staff members. School lawyers reported that it is challenging to maintain awareness of the SLP among such high staff and student numbers, when on-site only one or two days per week.

Additionally, staff turnover was reported to be high at both schools, presenting a challenge to maintaining both awareness of the SLP and relationships with staff that support referrals and delivery of legal education.

"I think most of our staff would know we have a school lawyer, but we have such a high turnover of staff that it's a challenge to constantly be updating everybody, because we've got new people that start every week. So I wouldn't be surprised if there's quite a few that wouldn't realise it."

– School Principal

The school lawyers noted that while they are available to speak to students and staff during their days off-site, they are contacted infrequently. When they do meet with clients via phone, it is a cumbersome process compared to on-site contact, which is a deterrent.

"I always make sure they're aware that I work four days a week. [I tell them] 'you can text me at any time' and yet they don't."

– School lawyer

"Sometimes they need to call me, so I'll get the support staff, like the careers mentor, to go find the student when I'm not in and ask them to arrange for the student to be placed in my office so they can call me and have that chat with me. But, it's a lot of admin work just to get to that point. Whereas if I'm at the school, I can just walk up to the student in class and [say] 'can I borrow you for 5 minutes?'"

– School lawyer

The school lawyers reported that they prioritise client work when on-site. This means that preparation for legal education sessions more often happens during their off-site time, which can inhibit their ability to collaborate with other Wellbeing staff and with teachers in the design of those sessions.

One principal noted that they would prefer to have the school lawyer on-site full-time but cannot afford it.

"The only issue for us at the moment is around the funding. I'd have the school lawyer here five days a week, but the brutal reality is we can't afford that at the moment."

– School Principal

2.5.3 Wellbeing staff not co-located

The Grange and WCC have different approaches to locating their Wellbeing teams. At The Grange, school counsellors are physically dispersed across the school – the Sports Science Academy Wellbeing member sits in the sports building, the Years 7/8 and Year 9 counsellors sit in offices within the relevant sub-schools, while the counsellor for Years 10/11/12 sits in the Careers and Pathways building with the school lawyer & some other student supports (e.g. Wellbeing coordinator and study mentors). At WCC, all Wellbeing staff are located in the student services building (see Section 1.1).

It was reported that it is harder to identify emerging trends in legal issues across and within year levels when some Wellbeing staff sit within a sub-school (see also Sections 2.3.2 and 2.4.4). There is also less interaction between the school lawyer and staff who sit in sub-schools (though there are regular meetings) because there is less opportunity for incidental conversation when in separate buildings.

"The location component is tricky because there's no space in the school, but it would definitely be helpful to have all of Wellbeing together, just for sharing of knowledge purposes... And then that way we can start to talk more about trends and issues. It's quite siloed... one Wellbeing person would be like, 'oh, this student's got a fine'. But then when I extrapolate that data into our

own spreadsheet, I'm seeing that there's four or five students getting pulled over for myki fines when they should be getting free Department of Transport stuff. So what's going on? And then I'm finding [out] that students ask for it, but they're not getting it because the school doesn't have any left. But it's just a matter of someone at the school asking for more. So there's these trends that are kind of falling through the gaps because they're not really communicating at that level."

– School lawyer

2.5.4 Student willingness to take action

Some students are reluctant to take legal action to resolve an issue they are experiencing, because they are concerned about repercussions or doubt that a positive outcome is possible. For example:

- Students with employment law matters can be reluctant to self-advocate for fear of losing their job
- Students experiencing violence from other young people in the local area may fear retaliation if they seek an intervention order and/or that it will make no difference.

"PSIOs [personal safety intervention orders] are always a hard one. They're usually hesitant to go through with the process because they don't have faith that the process is going to provide them with any practical protections. And so that's where, we're kind of working an uphill battle, trying to get them to understand that, 'no, it's not going to stop that person from doing it, but it's an added layer of protection for you to feel empowered in that space'. Some young people just put it in the too hard basket."

– School lawyer

"If they're contributing to the household and they're a primary income earner because they're in a single parent family, they're like, 'I can't afford to get fired.' That's a barrier.

We do a lot of work to try and empower our young clients, especially in the civil space, we try and empower them to advocate for themselves and take those steps. And sometimes that can seem really scary."

– School lawyer

It must be noted that while the above points can pose challenges to changing or improving a student's circumstances, they are not challenges to fulfilling a key aim of the SLP – which is to empower students with information about their options and to support them to make an informed choice about if and how they want to address their legal problem. Students potentially have many good reasons for choosing to take no action. This may mean that they continue being treated unfairly by an employer, for example, but they will have made an informed choice to do so.

2.5.5 Other challenges

Along with the main challenges described above, the evaluation received feedback related to other issues that sometimes impeded the SLP, including communication, proactive vs reactionary approaches, and a lack of clarity of the role of the role of the SLP:

- School lawyers are not linked into the schools' communication systems, including Teams and Compass, and therefore need to rely on other school staff to know what class a student is in, to know when assemblies are happening, and to circulate legal education material and information about the service, etc.

"I can't communicate with the students unless the teachers provide me with their number or I catch them in person... I have to rely on the teachers[s] to distribute the slides that I use in legal education... which they usually don't."

– School lawyer

- Busy class schedules, especially in senior school, make it difficult for school lawyers to book proactive legal education sessions. School lawyers reported that persistence, combined with building strong relationships with year level coordinators, was the best way through this challenge.

"I'm finding that it's more of a response to an incident as opposed to proactive

kind of [education] work. I would like to do a bit more work with driving rights or employment rights, more positive, age-appropriate rights as they're coming through the school years. But I'm finding it is more reactionary than anything."

– School lawyer

- Some students remain unclear about the school lawyer role and the SLP offerings despite continuous promotion and education.

"Kind of [hesitant about coming to see the school lawyer because] I've never heard of something like that before. It was usually whatever's been dealt with outside of the school, should be dealt with people ... outside of school."

– Student client

"I'm struggling to get the students to understand that 'we're here and you can come to me like any other staff member, but I'm also not a staff member. I don't care that you're on your phone. You're allowed to swear around me. I'm not going to tell your parents, we don't have those obligations and rules like the teachers do'. I'm finding that quite challenging."

– School lawyer

- Misperceptions about the quality of free services among some students (and their families), were reported during some student interviews. This can deter students from seeking help from the school lawyer. Students' experiences receiving high quality legal education go some way to mitigating against this, as does word of mouth by students who have had positive experiences of assistance from the SLP. School lawyers also noted that while they aim to be approachable and build rapport with students, they are careful to maintain a level of professionalism that helps instil trust and confidence in the quality of the services they provide.

"Some people will think, 'oh, it's a free lawyer. It won't be that helpful'... That's what I was thinking. That was what my parents were thinking at first... 'oh, it's free, so it won't

be ... good quality.' After talking with the school lawyer for a couple of sessions and I talked with my parents, [I said]... 'I'll go with the school lawyer. I don't want any private lawyers.'"

– Student client

"We do try to keep that consistent level of professionalism, so that a young person feels confident in us... because I know that a lot of them would... [think] 'you're a free lawyer, you're not going to be great.'"

– School lawyer

2.6 VALUE OF THE SLP

Feedback on the overall value of the SLP was received through interviews and questionnaire and fell into six key areas – prevention, costs avoided, student experiences, staff experiences, benefits for schools, and enhanced understanding of legal issues experienced by young people.

2.6.1 Prevention

Many evaluation participants reported that the most valuable aspect of the SLP is the legal education it provides, which was observed to help reduce or prevent decisions and behaviours by students that can lead to problems with the law.

"I think the value is in prevention. It's always been an early intervention, prevention concept pilot... That's the biggest value if we are looking at it through a cost-benefit, cost-savings lens. Doing education, getting in there before things get chaotic and hit a crisis point."

– Program Manager

"I haven't had any issues with my cohort for three years around the sexting stuff... I'm happy to say the program had something to do with it, [though] I'm sure it occurs. But as long as they're aware of [the possible] outcome, if it does get out."

– Teacher

“I think for me preventative measures, just to avoid issues altogether, is probably the most beneficial part of it.”

– Teacher

“You would have to argue that if our kids, in the midst of a youth crime issue in the local [area]... are underrepresented, why is that? Partly you’d have to argue that the role of the school lawyer has created that.”

– School Principal

“We’ve got 58 different cultures here. We very, very rarely have any incidences around racism or violence. And... we haven’t had kids engaged in violent attacks, knife crime, armed robberies, carjackings, which is pretty good.”

– School Principal

It was noted that one aim of legal education is for students to take away one key piece of information that might help them in a potentially risky situation. It was also noted that students better retain messages that have been repeated over time.

“[Legal education] on bullying for example, we tell them that this is a criminal offence, whether you listen or not, hopefully you take that away, that bullying can also be a crime and maybe through our education they might think twice about some bullying behaviours or sexting behaviours.”

– Program Manager

Numerous students reported that the school lawyer’s work helped students better understand possible legal consequences to their behaviour, which gave them pause to reflect prior to engaging in certain behaviours, and in fact had reduced instances of violence at the schools.

“One of our friends goes to [another local school] and they don’t have a school lawyer and it’s bad, it’s bringing vapes, it’s bringing knives, it’s knife fights outside school... The kids there, so many of them end up in the

system. They just don’t really know about [legal] stuff... I feel like that would help them sort of understand what they’re doing because I don’t think they grasp it. They’re like, ‘oh, I’m just a kid. They [the police] can’t do anything.”

– Student non-client

“[Fights at school are] just basically petty ones, but they used to be super physical and really bad. But I think [the school lawyer’s] been really helpful because all the kids go like, ‘oh wait, no, [the school lawyer] said this can actually affect us... It’s been quite a while since a fight.”

– Student non-client

It was also reported that the SLP has potential to help reduce cycles of family violence²² through legal education that equips young people with the language and information to speak about family violence and that challenges the normalisation of family violence and the attitudes that support it. The Program Manager described that through legal support and legal education, students’ knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and circumstances can be influenced to reduce the likelihood of patterns of family violence repeating.

“We have an opportunity to work with kids that are victim survivors... to ensure that the cycle doesn’t continue, and get all this support for those kids that are experiencing family violence that also may use violence themselves... So with education on family violence - what is healthy? What is okay? What is legal? When is it controlling and coercive behaviour? You make opportunity to address that, to stop that cycle.”

– Program Manager

Taboos against speaking about family matters were noted by school lawyers and the Program Manager as a challenge to this cycle breaking, as were beliefs across many cultures that physical discipline is acceptable. They described however, that there is still value in providing information and challenging these ideas with students, or at least planting seeds of ideas, to help positively shape their understanding and behaviour.

“Hope it might help with shifting their mindset. It won’t happen straight away, but that seed might be planted at a young age and it’s better to get there earlier, at school age when they’re growing and learning as humans and developing their moral compass and value set. At that formative age, rather than when they’re 30, when things are so ingrained... there’s not one solution to all these things... we need to try everything.”

– Program Manager

2.6.2 Costs avoided

Numerous stakeholders described that the SLP’s prevention and early intervention approach helps avoid costs for different stakeholders.

Legal education was reported to empower students with information and increase the likelihood of them making decisions that keep them safe and out of trouble with the law. This prevention work was described by numerous stakeholders as contributing to reduced police and court costs for government.

“I think it would have [created cost savings for government], yes. I think some of my kids need that explicit teaching that will help them to make the right decision.”

– School Principal

Similarly, legal assistance was reported to help reduce costs to the justice system by reducing the number of matters that go to hearing and/or reducing court time through the preparation and negotiations the school lawyer can undertake for students they represent (e.g. getting them involved diversion programs). For example, it was described by a school lawyer that they usually engage with students and their legal matters much earlier than other criminal defence lawyers, who can often only meet their client for the first time on the first day of court (e.g. duty lawyer). It was reported that most negotiations with police and prosecution to divert a student client away from the criminal justice system have been successful, with outcomes including withdrawal of charges, cautions, and diversions.

School lawyers also reported that the help they provide young people with their non-legal needs

(e.g. via warm referral to non-legal support) can also lead to costs savings for government as those young people are then less likely to need crisis support.

While it was not possible within this evaluation to calculate an estimate of the total value of these reported avoided costs (see section 1.5) the following case studies are examples of outcomes achieved by the SLP with two student clients and the prospective costs avoided. A vignette is also included to further show how legal assistance provided to students through the SLP can reduce or avoid costs for a range of stakeholders.

CASE STUDY 2:

Crime and PSIO

The SLP client was a student charged with a criminal offence. The police also subsequently applied for a personal safety intervention order (PSIO) against the student client on behalf of the victim which proceeded alongside the criminal matter.

The student client’s parents initially wanted to seek private legal assistance but then became aware of the cost involved. The student client decided to engage the school lawyer after learning about the benefits of the SLP, including the school lawyer: being on-site at the school and two local youth service hubs ; having specialist youth knowledge; having access to extensive youth support networks; and having the ability to make meaningful referrals for the student client.

The school lawyer supported the client in a range of ways: they attended court for the criminal matter 5 times; made 4 referrals to mental health support for the student client; and had several conferences with prosecution to reach an appropriate outcome for the student client, including negotiating a diversion disposition.

The matter was resolved with the student being placed by the Court on an 11-month diversionary order with specific conditions attached, including that they engage in treatment to address the offending behaviour. If the student client successfully completed the conditions of the order, they would be given the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions without receiving a formal criminal record. This outcome was also contingent on them not offending again.

²² The Program Manager described research that shows perpetrators of family violence were frequently victims of family violence as children themselves and that women who experienced violence as children are more likely to experience family violence as adults.

The school lawyer was able to maintain weekly contact with the student client and regular contact with the treatment provider as well. The unique position of the school lawyer helped ensure the student client was meeting the Court's expectations and also getting the support they needed from the treatment provider. As a result, the student finished the treatment condition and completed the order. Notably, the student client remained engaged with school throughout this time as well.

Due to engagement in treatment and no further offending, the PSIO was also withdrawn after an assessment by police concluded that the student client no longer posed a risk to the victim. This required two court appearances by the school lawyer.

SUMMARY OF ASSISTANCE AND PROSPECTIVE COSTS AVOIDED

Criminal matter (Children's Court)

The SLP worked on the file over 11 months and made 5 court appearances. Diversion granted with specific conditions regarding offending.

Prospective costs avoided:

- Without the school lawyer and their negotiation for a diversion, there was a higher chance the student client would have been given a term of detention at a youth detention, at a cost of **\$5,906** per day.
- Successfully completing their diversion, the student client avoided a criminal record which would have negatively impacted future employment opportunities and increased the likelihood of them being unemployed and contributing to greater costs to government (e.g. through unemployment benefits claimed and tax not paid) - **\$10,300** per year.

Intervention order

The school lawyer represented the student client on two occasions regarding an application for a PSIO against them and supported their engagement in offence-specific treatment, as stipulated by their diversionary order. The student client adhered to the interim PSIO and there were no further incidents.

Consequently, after 11 months, both the police and the Court determined that there was no ongoing risk to the victim, and the PSIO was withdrawn by the Police.

Prospective costs avoided:

- Were it not for the school lawyer's advocacy, their advice to the student client about the benefits of engaging in treatment, and their regular contact to ensure compliance, the student client may have breached the PSIO and/or reoffended. This could have resulted in harm to the victim, new criminal charges and criminal proceedings – estimated cost of criminal matter - **\$1,233** per case.
- It would also have meant further PSIO hearings were necessary to reach final resolution – average cost – **\$1,498** per case.

Referrals

The school lawyer made 4 referrals for the student client, including for offence-specific treatment, mental health support and to social sports programs. Through regular contact with the student client and liaising with service providers, the school lawyer supported successful engagement with those services.

Prospective costs avoided:

- Without mental health support, the student client's mental health would likely have deteriorated further, possibly to a point where crisis intervention and hospitalisation may have been required – estimated cost **\$1,957** per day.²³

CASE STUDY 3:

Fines

The student client, a full-time student in their final year (completing VCE), received two fines while learning to drive, totalling \$480. They were unable to pay the fines and their parents (low-income) were not in a position to contribute.

Initially the school lawyer assisted the student client to request an internal review to withdraw the fines, which was rejected by the issuing agency.

The school lawyer subsequently advocated on behalf of the student client for them to be allowed to participate in the Work and Development Permit (WDP) scheme to work off their fine by participating in the school's mentor program. Through an existing relationship with an approved organisation (limited in number in the Western suburbs), the school lawyer organised a sponsor for the student client, notwithstanding they lived outside of the sponsor's catchment area. The sponsor organisation then worked with the school's mentoring program, enabling the student to address their fines by engaging with the school mentor across multiple weeks.

The mentoring the student client participated in through the WDP supported them across numerous areas, including employment. The student client finished the WDP and the fines matter resolved.

Without the support of the SLP the student client would have left the fines unpaid until after their final exams, when they could then get a part-time job to pay them down. During this time, the fines would have progressed through various stages, each more serious and involving additional fees, and potentially sanctions (e.g. licence suspension). Further, it is expected that the stress of escalating, outstanding fines would have negatively impacted the student client's mental health and exam performance during a critical school year.

Summary of assistance and prospective costs avoided

- Left unpaid, the fines had the potential to lead to an additional **\$480** in fees,²⁴ and further action by Fines Victoria including sanctions and the risk of criminal charges – average cost of **\$1,233** per case.²⁵
- A criminal record would then increase the likelihood of the student client being unemployed in future and contributing to greater costs to government - **\$10,300** per year.²⁶

By connecting the student client to the WDP, and through that the school mentoring program, the student client received support that is likely to improve their employability and decrease their risk of unemployment. A disengaged unemployed young adult costs **\$10,300** per year.²⁷

A HOLISTIC APPROACH WHERE ALL STAKEHOLDERS BENEFIT

A teacher at the high school was made aware that John (not his real name), a student, was interviewed and charged by police. With John's consent, the teacher referred him to the school lawyer, as John was unsure about his legal matter and what he needed to do.

The school lawyer provided John with initial advice and received instructions to obtain further evidence, the police brief, and court details. The lawyer explained to John his responsibilities regarding appearing before the courts.

John was also referred to "wrap-around services", including counselling support, housing support, and family violence support, to provide him with immediate help and prevent those issues escalating to crises, which may lead to disengagement with both the youth justice process and with school. Further, these referrals aim to increase the chance that John engages in rehabilitation programs such as drug and or alcohol counselling, which help reduce recidivism and further harm to the community.

The school lawyer then provided John with legal advice and detailed the options for dealing with their legal matter. As a result of John's early engagement with the SLP and his willingness to engage with the support services the school lawyer referred him to, an early diversion recommendation was negotiated before the first court date.

Diversion was completed on the first day with no further court days required. Typically a criminal matter like John's would result in 3 to 5 court dates.

John has stayed out of trouble, continued to regularly attend school and to work with school wellbeing staff and the other supports put in place for him.

²³ In 2021-22, the average cost per inpatient bed in a psychiatric hospital specifically for mental health treatment was \$1957 per person. (13 Services for mental health - Report on Government Services 2024 - Productivity Commission)

²⁴ \$28.40 – Penalty Reminder Notice; \$147.10 – Notice of Final Demand; \$64.30 – Enforcement Warrant = \$239.80 per fine.

²⁵ The Victorian Budget 2023-24 Paper No. 3 states the average cost per case of criminal matters disposed of in the Children's Court was \$1,233 in 2021-22 (2023-24 Service Delivery).

²⁶ Research has found that a disengaged young adult unemployed w/o a qualification costs taxpayers \$10,300 a year ('It's high stakes': the real cost of dropping out of school)

²⁷ Ibid

2.6.3 The student experience

The most valuable element of having access to a school lawyer, as reported by students, was having someone knowledgeable and caring they could talk to at school when they had a legal issue or question; someone who was on their side and who would support them without judging or shaming them.

“The feeling of being able to speak freely without being judged or shamed, but also having a sense of comfort and feeling safe even though I am not the type to open up to people. [The school lawyer] always reassured me that everything would be okay, and I could get through it all in the long run.”

– Student client (Feedback questionnaire)

“It gives the students a sense of security within the school. If they have a problem... they can come to a school lawyer.”

– Student non-client

“Dealing with legal matters and ... if you are in need of extra support school lawyers are the best source.”

– Student client (Feedback questionnaire)

“She listened to me and got me the right resources and information for my situation.”

– Student Client (Feedback questionnaire)

2.6.4 The staff experience

The most valuable aspect of the SLP, as reported by school staff who participated in the evaluation, is that it enables them to better support students who have legal issues. Teaching and Wellbeing staff reported that they can easily refer students to the school lawyer and are confident that students will receive appropriate and timely help. Staff described how this helps them do their own jobs better by allowing them to focus on their area of expertise, rather than spending time trying to find the right external support for a student.

“A few kids have been involved with police... over the years that I’ve been in this role. So it’s actually really good when kids come and say something like, ‘oh, I was arrested last night. What do I do?’ [I can give them the school lawyer’s] number, or ‘I can organise an appointment for you’. And it takes the stress off me or my team for dealing with those intimate issues or particular things that aren’t really a teacher’s role.”

– Teacher

“It reduces the load of us having to communicate with police or look for taking it [supporting a student] on as an additional role... if everyone plays their individual roles, it makes the team strong and then we can support the students better.”

– Teacher

“It’s opened up a lot for the students in terms of knowing they can come to somebody and speak to them confidentially and have that nagging question answered, because a lot of them would come to us as counsellors and basically unload, but we would then have to go through a secondary or third party... They don’t have to wait for somebody else to get back to them. [The school lawyer] can say, ‘well you can do this, or you can do that’... a quick answer.

– Wellbeing staff

Staff respondents described how valuable it was to have the school lawyer deliver legal education to students in response to an incident, especially when staff felt they had insufficient content knowledge to deliver information themselves.

“...or there’s an issue that’s happened, we can say, ‘are you able to speak with that student, or are you able to come in and speak to the class about this certain topic?’ That’s been really valuable because... [the school]

would expect us to run it, which is really hard because we are not experienced in that subject.”

– Wellbeing staff

Wellbeing staff also noted that the help they can provide to students’ families has been enhanced because of the connections to other legal and community services the school lawyer provides.

2.6.5 Benefits for schools

The evaluation found that the SLP enables a greater connection between schools and community legal services, and all the programs those services run or are connected to. As a result, schools can offer more support to families and to their broader community who access community services provided at the school after school hours.

One school described how they were able to host Legal Aid’s Citizenship Project at the Community Hub on-site, thereby providing help to students’ families, in a familiar place where they felt safe.

“We hosted sessions... where [students] could get their whole family support in obtaining their citizenship, which is really important because for us, we were trying to navigate that ourselves and it’s a huge system...that really filled a gap for us to be able to refer and get the right kind of support in terms of their application and following that all the way through... it was such a relief to outsource that to the community legal education team. That’s a really valuable piece.”

– Wellbeing staff

“I run citizenship appointments at school... and the engagement [with that project] skyrockets. [The Citizenship Project] had families who have not shown up to their last four appointments at the Sunshine office suddenly all come into school because it’s a known place, it’s a safe place. They come in, they get the legal help they need.”

– School lawyer

As well as such broader community interactions, the evaluation also noted that through the schools’ partnership with Westjustice, other benefits and initiatives were accessible to students including access to free public transport (Myki) cards.

Notably, it was acknowledged that by offering more holistic wellbeing support (in the form of the SLP) in a high need area, the schools may be able to attract more students.

2.6.6 Understanding legal issues experienced by young people

Westjustice stakeholders noted that the SLP contributes to better understanding of young people’s experience of legal issues and what those issues are. By being immersed in school settings and focusing on maintaining rapport with young people, school lawyers are able to have conversations with young people, make observations & ask questions that other adults can’t.

“We’re in a space that not many other legal services have access to. All the focus is on school aged students. And I think the benefit of that is that we’re uncovering the true issues that school age students are facing because they never had this voice, they never had this access to justice and legal services before.”

– Program Manager

Through this access and the increased understanding of young peoples’ legal needs, Westjustice (and other community legal centres managing SLPs) are in a better position to respond to and advocate for young people’s needs.

“Where I see this project being hugely beneficial is in the family violence narrative. Whether it’s federal or state government discourse, often children in the family violence context are the forgotten people. They themselves are victim survivors in their own right and they’re often forgotten about. They’re not heard.”

– Program Manager

2.7 STAKEHOLDER SUGGESTIONS FOR THE SLP

Evaluation participants were asked to share their ideas about how the SLP could be improved. Responses centred around ways of enabling more students to access legal assistance and education from school lawyers. There were three main suggestions – greater promotion of the SLP within schools, lawyers spending more time onsite at schools and implementing the SLP at more schools.

i. Increase publicity of the SLP

Students and staff all reported a need for more advertising and awareness raising about the role of the school lawyer, directed toward both students and staff. This would include outlining what the school lawyer can assist with, when they are available, and how to seek support or make referrals.

Students suggested the following platforms to achieve increased publicity:

- The school lawyer could speak at school assemblies more often and attend occasional morning home group meetings
- Advertise on Microsoft Teams, for students to see
- Make announcements over the school PA system (although one student noted that senior students tend not to listen to announcements as they are usually relevant only to junior school students)
- Putting up posters around the school, including in the library.

Staff members suggested that having the school lawyer attend more staff meetings would help raise their profile.

“There’s not much advertisement at school unless you walk up to the careers hub... As well as also putting out more information about how you access [the school lawyer] and get in contact on days that [they’re] not here. So... actually advertising and saying, ‘oh, send an email to this, or talk to a teacher and they’ll help organise,’ those kinds of things where it’s just a little bit more awareness around school that this resource exists’

– Student non-client

“Just if maybe we had posters or more announcements about it. I think maybe sometimes kids might forget it. They’re so worked up about schoolwork and other stuff that’s going on. They might forget that they have ways to help them and things that are here... So we have student announcements. If the student announcement says, ‘just a reminder, our school lawyer is here today if you need any help.’ Just reminding kids constantly, just really reiterating it so that they know it’s there.”

– Student client

ii. Increase lawyer time on-site

Both students and staff reported that they would like the school lawyer to be present at school more often, with some suggesting full-time presence. Greater time on-site would enable more legal education to be delivered, which would increase opportunities to build awareness and trust with students and lead to more referrals (including self-referrals). Additional days on-site would also enable more convenient appointment times and shorter wait times.

“It would be nice if a school lawyer could work here full-time.”

– Student client

“If there was more days, I feel like there could be more of that education component, which would probably create more referrals, because I still feel like there’s a percentage of kids that just will not speak about what’s going on yet. They need to build that trust, so that needs time.”

– Wellbeing staff

“My ideal for the School Lawyer Program is more days, more access to students to do education, and doing it really, really frequently and regularly. So that’s being able to get [into classrooms], at least once every few weeks we’ve got an [education] session booked in.”

– Program Manager

Some suggested that a second lawyer may be beneficial, especially if they were of a different gender from the current school lawyer, as this might make some students more comfortable to seek help.

School lawyers suggested that with more time and resources, they would like to provide additional supports to students. This could include help that may not be urgent, but that empowers students and could help them interact more positively with the legal system.

“More resources to be there with the young person even when we don’t necessarily have to be. So if young person has to go to court because their parents have a family violence order against each other [for example] and they’re an affected family member, going to court with them just to make sure [they have their own legal support] because the young person is entitled to that. And to be there to make sure that their voice is heard in those proceedings where otherwise they wouldn’t be. And where there’s not an issue... we’ll just tell them what to expect. But I think actually going through that would have a huge impact on them.”

– School lawyer

iii. Run the SLP in other schools

School lawyers, several students and staff all believed that other schools would benefit from incorporating a SLP.

“I’d also like to see more schools have access to a school lawyer. I think we’re very lucky, but not every school is as lucky as us. And I think that some of that is maybe around other schools understanding the benefit and understanding the value.”

– Wellbeing staff

“I could easily name four [schools] that would wildly benefit.”

– School lawyer

“I feel like it’s not just the schools that do have the school lawyer that have problems, it’s everyone that has problems. And it might be a big problem or it might be a mediocre problem, but a problem is a problem, so if you need to talk to someone or get more information on your problem, then it’s good to talk to a school lawyer about it because they can inform you. So I’d say more schools should have the program.”

– Student client

Students who had spoken to friends at other schools reported that they expressed great interest in also having a school lawyer.

“When I’ve mentioned it to people from other schools, they’ve definitely been like, ‘we don’t have that. Why don’t we get that?’ Because it’s hard for students to go and seek that outside of school. So I think a lot of other schools would appreciate it as well, but I think we’re lucky to have it. Definitely.” – Student non-client

Other suggestions

- The School Lawyer Reference Group to be utilised more as a source for both professional development opportunities for school lawyers and for strategic advocacy to promote the SLP. For example, the Reference Group could arrange placement opportunities for school lawyers to see how other SLPs operate and draw ideas for their own school and practice.
- Principals become more directive and require year level leaders, at the start of each year, to book in a minimum number of legal proactive classroom education sessions with the school lawyer.

topics have clear relevance for adolescents – bullying and cyber bullying, sexting, assault, work rights and consent – and the content was tailored and delivered using age-appropriate language.

Overall, the evaluation concludes that legal education was both accessible and relevant to students.



This section considers and answers each of the 9 key evaluation questions (outlined in section 1.2) using the findings presented in Section 2.

3.1 LEGAL SERVICES DELIVERED

1. To what extent has the SLP provided students with accessible legal assistance and relevant legal education?

Over the two years from 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2023, across the two case study sites, the SLP delivered:

- 561 legal assistance services (including legal information, advice, referral and representation) to 196 students
- 105 legal education sessions to more than 6,140 students.

In the absence of targets, the evaluation cannot assess the sufficiency of these numbers. However, and importantly, both of the schools and Westjustice indicated they were satisfied, while seeing some scope for delivering more legal assistance and education to more students.

The evaluation found that it is a straightforward process for staff to refer students to the school lawyer, and that students can generally obtain an appointment with the school lawyer at a time that is convenient to them, within a week of making an enquiry.

The evaluation found that while students can easily self-refer to the SLP – approximately half of legal services delivered resulted from self-referral – there are numerous hindrances to self-referral, mainly:

- A proportion of students remain unaware of the SLP or do not sufficiently understand the help being offered. This challenge is greatest where wellbeing services are dispersed across the school and the school lawyer is on-site only one day per week.
- The negative attitudes among some students to help-seeking generally and to lawyers specifically, despite ongoing relationship building and legal education.

Most of the legal education sessions delivered to students by the school lawyers were the result of requests from the school (i.e. principals, year level leaders, Wellbeing staff and teachers), in response to identified needs (e.g. emerging trends observed, prompted by a specific incident). The main session topics have clear relevance for adolescents – bullying and cyber bullying, sexting, assault, work rights and consent – and the content was tailored and delivered using age-appropriate language.

Overall, the evaluation concludes that legal education was both accessible and relevant to students.

3.2 EFFECTIVENESS

3.2.1 Outcomes for students

2. To what extent has the SLP increased students' knowledge as intended?

The evaluation received consistent feedback that the SLP has strengthened students' understanding of:

- Their rights and responsibilities
- Key elements of laws likely to impact their daily lives
- Signs to be alert to in various situations that indicate legal help may be needed.

The evaluation found that legal education was the main method for improving student knowledge, and that while several hundred students can be reached simultaneously (e.g. through presentations at assembly), deeper learning happens in smaller, interactive legal education sessions. The evaluation found that busy year level schedules, combined with the school lawyer's limited time on-site, hampered the amount of legal education that was delivered, but that greater cooperation and commitment to planning from schools would enable school lawyers to deliver more sessions. The evaluation also found positive feedback about the effectiveness of legal education delivered at The Grange's primary campus to students in years 4/5/6.

3. To what extent has the SLP empowered students as intended?

The evaluation received compelling feedback from the range of participating stakeholders, most importantly from students themselves, that SLP-provided legal assistance and legal education has empowered students. Those who received legal assistance have felt listened to, supported, and treated with respect, and were helped to understand their legal options such that they felt empowered to make decisions about their legal issue. The evaluation also found that by increasing student familiarity and comfort with lawyers, and raising awareness of free legal services, the SLP helps empower students to seek legal help when needed, when they are no longer students.

The evaluation found that legal education delivered in response to emerging legal issues has helped equip students to better understand the implications of those issues and feel more confident making informed decisions in those situations.

4. To what extent have students' legal issues been addressed through the SLP?

The SLP has effectively addressed a range of student legal issues in areas of law anticipated by the program and for which the lawyers have expertise or can make supported referrals. Outcomes have included:

- Waiver of fines
- Withdrawal of criminal charges
- Diversion in criminal matters (with discharge of charges on successful completion)
- Supported self-advocacy for employment problems
- Acquiring citizenship.

Where a legal resolution was not achieved, this was usually because the student made an informed choice not to pursue a legal remedy.

5. To what extent is the SLP impacting student health, wellbeing and school engagement?

The evaluation found that 1:1 legal assistance effectively contributed to improved student health and wellbeing. Students who were distressed because they did not know how to take action to resolve a legal problem, and students with fines or criminal matters who were stressed about possible outcomes, gained some peace of mind from learning about their options. Students also reported feeling less alone and more confident about their situation improving, with the support of the school lawyer.

The evaluation found that the SLP effectively contributes to improved school engagement in a range of ways. For those students whose legal issues are causing levels of stress that interfere with their ability to participate in or attend class, legal assistance and resolution of those issues can help remove that stress. School lawyers have contributed to engagement by linking students into other wellbeing support, and by helping students with criminal matters to understand that regularly attending school can contribute to a better legal outcome for them. The SLP has also helped engagement with education by linking migrant and refugee students to VLA's Citizenship Project, through which many students have obtained citizenship and are now eligible for reduced university fees, and therefore more likely to access tertiary education.

3.2.2 Outcomes for schools

The evaluation found that the SLP was effective for bringing about the positive intended outcomes for schools (see Figure 1).

The SLP provides a highly valued, additional dimension of support and education to the schools' wellbeing offerings, enhancing wellbeing services overall. All stakeholders reported that the SLP enabled schools to provide more holistic support to students for issues faced while in school, and in preparing them for adulthood. Principals described that the SLP enhanced their school's Tier 1 interventions to promote and support student mental health and wellbeing.

The evaluation also found that the SLP helped schools form stronger connections to their local community legal service, and through that, to other programs that students and their families can benefit from.

6. To what extent has the SLP increased staff knowledge as intended?

The SLP has helped increase knowledge among staff about student rights and the laws commonly affecting adolescents through:

- staff being present at legal education sessions delivered to students by the school lawyer
- secondary consultations
- To a lesser extent, legal education sessions for staff.

With this improved knowledge, some staff gained greater confidence to share legal information with students and their families/carers. The evaluation did not gather data to quantify this impact, nor were there any targets regarding this outcome.

The evaluation is therefore unable to comment on the sufficiency of this outcome but can report that school principals and staff viewed this as a positive aspect of the SLP.

3.3 VALUE

7. What value does the School Lawyer Program provide?

The evaluation found that the SLP was highly valued by all stakeholders, for a range of benefits it produces.

One of the most valued aspects of the SLP is that it helps reduce and prevent legal problems for students. Through legal education and assistance, the school lawyer helped students better understand possible legal consequences of their behaviour and provided them with legal information to help them assert their rights and/or make decisions to enhance rather than risk their safety. The SLP also helped equip young people with language and information to think and speak about their rights, and challenge attitudes that normalise abuses such as violence and discrimination.

Students value having access to a knowledgeable and caring lawyer at school who they can easily talk to about a legal issue or just ask a question. Students felt the school lawyer was on their side and supported them without judging or shaming them.

Staff value having a lawyer on-site who delivers legal education to students, especially when a new issue is emerging or there has been an incident at school that indicates students need support and legal information that other staff do not feel they can offer. Staff also value being able to easily refer students with legal problems to timely, high quality legal assistance on-site. This took pressure off teaching and Wellbeing staff to try to find appropriate external support for the student, enabling them instead to focus on their area of expertise.

The SLP most readily creates value for all when the school lawyer's office is in an easy to access location, co-located with all other wellbeing staff.

The partnership between the schools and Westjustice has provided schools with greater awareness of and connection to other programs and supports that may benefit students and school families (e.g. travel pass program that provides free transport passes to students in crisis).

Through the SLP, Westjustice is deepening its understanding of young people's legal needs and their experiences of legal issues. This improves Westjustice's ability to respond to and advocate for young people's needs throughout its Youth Law Program.





RECOMMENDATIONS

Five key recommendations emerge from the evaluation – four from stakeholder suggestions and one from the evaluation process itself.

RECOMMENDATION 1: INCREASE PUBLICITY OF THE SLP AT SCHOOLS

Increased advertising is needed for wider awareness of the SLP among students and staff, including when and how to access the school lawyer and matters they can assist with. It is recommended that:

- Clear posters advertising the service be developed and placed around the school where students of all year levels will see them, including in the library
- The school lawyer speak at school assemblies more often and attend occasional morning home group meetings to publicise the service
- Microsoft Teams be used to advertise the SLP more often
- The school lawyer attends more staff meeting to raise their profile among staff.

RECOMMENDATION 2: INCREASE TIME LAWYER SPENDS ON-SITE

More time on-site would enable the school lawyers to build stronger relationships, trust and rapport, deliver more legal education, and provide more appointments across a wider range of times. It is recommended that funding options be explored to enable school lawyers to be on-site 3 to 4 days per week, allowing at least 1 day per week for them to continue working on other Westjustice Youth Law Programs (this supports their professional development and helps avoid feelings of isolation as the sole legal practitioner at the school).

RECOMMENDATION 3: INCREASE PROACTIVE LEGAL EDUCATION

There was consistent evidence that legal education delivered by the SLP empowered students and played a role in prevention and early intervention. Furthermore, there was support from all stakeholders, including students, for more legal education to be delivered.

With more time onsite (as per recommendation 2) it is recommended that school lawyers:

- Plan and deliver more legal education sessions, with tailored content, to all secondary year levels
- Explore and develop opportunities to deliver legal education to primary year levels
- Are provided additional training and/or assistance (e.g. from teachers) to ensure legal education is designed and delivered in developmentally appropriate, effective and engaging ways
- Are supported to regularly collect feedback on the legal education they deliver and its impacts, and to use that information to inform development of the SLP.

This recommendation should be implemented with consideration of findings and recommendations of the Independent Review of the NLAP, including:

- "Improving legal outcomes for [children and young people] relies on increased funding for... Community Legal Education (CLE), as part of baseline funding for all legal assistance providers."
- "There is evidence of CLE activity, such as forums or information sessions delivered by legal assistance providers... However, little else is known about how much CLE is delivered, or about its effectiveness in increasing understanding of legal issues and what downstream impact this can have on demand for legal assistance services."

RECOMMENDATION 4: EXPAND THE SCHOOL LAWYER PROGRAM TO OTHER SCHOOLS IN MELBOURNE'S WEST AND THROUGHOUT VICTORIA

The SLP enhances the suite of Tier 1 interventions that schools provide to promote and support student mental health and wellbeing and enables schools to provide more holistic support and education to prepare students for their future and life outside school. It is recommended that Westjustice continue seeking other schools to partner with and continues seeking and advocating for funding for additional SLPs.

RECOMMENDATION 5: REFINE DATA COLLECTION AND RECORDING

With better data the SLP could improve how it tracks, understands and shares its achievements and progress. It is recommended that:

- Westjustice consult school lawyers to understand and address challenges and barriers to entering information about legal outcomes in the Actionstep data system
- A range of options are developed, trialled and embedded for regularly collecting, recording and reflecting on feedback from more legal education sessions
- The program considers regular snapshot surveys of student clients using the legal assistance questionnaire developed for this evaluation
- The program review and update the SLP logic model (last updated in 2018) and develop a monitoring, evaluation and learning framework that supports targeted and systematic data collection, analysis and reflection and reporting against intended outcomes
- The program seeks funding to develop and implement a robust approach to estimating the total costs avoided through this early intervention initiative.

²⁸ Attorney-General's Department. Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership, Final Report (2024), p.65.





5

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation used a multi-site case study approach, and mixed-methods for data collection.

5.1 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods, though primarily qualitative, approach to gather a range of data to answer the evaluation questions.

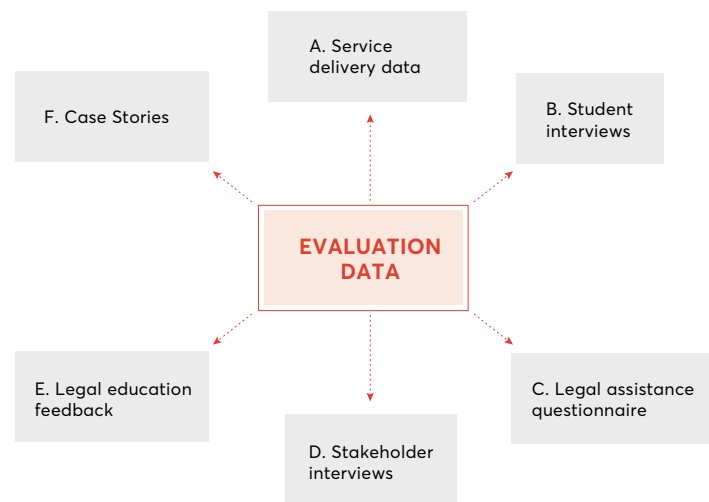


Figure 6: Data sources

5.1.1 Service delivery data

The evaluator was provided with de-identified service delivery information as recorded by school lawyers in the school lawyer Excel spreadsheet. This spreadsheet documents:

- Legal assistance services – date and type of service, legal problem type, client age, gender and year level and how the client was referred to the lawyer
- Legal education delivered – topic, number of participants and their year level, duration, format and comments/notes about the session.

Descriptive statistics were prepared within Excel.

5.1.2 Student interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on-site at the two schools with students who received assistance from the school lawyer (clients) and from students who didn't receive assistance from the school lawyer (non-clients). All interviews with students were conducted on school premises in a space that afforded privacy while keeping students visible to staff. Consent to participate was obtained from students and from parents/carers of students under 18 years.

- **Student client interviews** (n=8): students who received representation assistance from the school lawyer in the six months preceding the evaluation, or advice in the two months preceding, participated in a 1:1, semi-structured interview with the evaluator. Clients were asked how helpful the school lawyer was and what difference the service made to them, as well as suggestions for improvement. Student clients were asked not to share any details about their legal problem with the evaluator, and were reminded throughout their interview, to speak only in general terms. Client interviews ranged in duration from approximately 11 to 15 minutes.
- **Student non-client interviews** (3 groups; n=17): representatives of the student body, Student Representative Council students and/or school captains were invited to participate in a group interview to provide feedback about their experiences of legal education by the school lawyer and observations of the impact of the SLP on students and their school. Student non-clients were asked how helpful legal education has been, what they like and dislike about having a lawyer at school, and suggestions for improving the service. Student non-clients were advised not to share with the evaluator any details about any legal problem they may have, nor details about any legal matters of any other students. Group interviews with student non-clients ranged in duration from approximately 13 to 22 minutes.

With student permission, interviews were recorded and transcribed in full to support detailed analysis. Permission was also obtained from students to use anonymised quotes from their interviews in this report.

5.1.3 Legal assistance questionnaire

During a 4-week period (July–August 2024), all students who had an appointment with the school lawyer for detailed information, advice or ongoing representation, were invited by the lawyer to complete an anonymous, self-administered questionnaire to provide feedback about the legal assistance they received. The short questionnaire included nine closed and two open questions and was administered at the end of the appointment. It took approximately 2 to 5 minutes to complete.

Of the 14 students invited to complete the questionnaire, all agreed; response rate = 100%.

5.1.4 Stakeholder interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 stakeholders from the two participating schools and Westjustice:

- Across The Grange and WCC
 - Principals x 2
 - Wellbeing staff x 6
 - Teachers x 3
- Westjustice
 - School lawyers x 2
 - Project Manager x 1

Interviews were conducted on-site at the schools and were 20 to 30 minutes in duration. Interviews with Westjustice stakeholders were conducted via videoconference (Teams) and were approximately one hour long. With stakeholder permission, interviews were recorded and transcribed in full to support detailed analysis. Permission was also obtained from stakeholders to use anonymised quotes from their interviews in this report.

5.1.5 Legal education feedback

The evaluator reviewed and analysed anonymous feedback collected by the school lawyers from students at legal education sessions conducted between 1 July 2022 and 30 June 2024. Feedback was available for two sessions.

5.1.6 Client stories

The evaluation reviewed two case stories – two case studies and one vignette.

Case studies describe the experience of specific student-clients assisted by the SLP who were 18 years or older at the time of the evaluation, and who gave informed consent for their story to be shared. Case studies were prepared in accordance with the Westjustice Case Study Policy, under which clients can consent to their name being used in the case study, or they may agree to a de-identified write-up. Clients were supported to understand the implications of the case study identifying them explicitly, and the risk and implications of someone in the school community identifying that the case study is about them, though their name and other identifying information was changed.

Vignettes are stories of hypothetical clients that draw upon a combination of actual client experiences, typical to the program. This approach protects the privacy and anonymity of individual clients who may otherwise be identified through a case study approach, while sharing rich information about common experiences, outcomes and costs avoided through the SLP. Vignettes were written by the school lawyers and Project Manager.

5.2 DATA ANALYSIS

Interview data were analysed for themes using Dedoose v.9.2.12 (specialist software for analysing qualitative and mixed methods research). Survey data were analysed using Microsoft Excel to produce descriptive statistics.

5.3 REPORTING

The evaluator prepared a draft evaluation report which was shared with Westjustice for review. A feedback meeting was convened for Westjustice staff to discuss the findings with the evaluator and refine the recommendations. Feedback was incorporated into the final version of this report.

²⁹ Students below 18 years who did not want their parent/carer to know they have been assisted by the School Lawyer were not eligible to participate in the evaluation.

Westjustice