

The Victorian Department of Education and Training Complex Matters Support Team

A case study
for the national
strategy to address
the abuse of
teachers, school
leaders and other
school staff.

The Victorian Department of Education and Training (the Department) supports 2,263 schools and over one million students across a range of locations and contexts. The Department is committed to improving the health and wellbeing of school leaders in a systematic and sustainable way, with the belief that thriving school principals create a positive environment for teaching and learning where students, teachers and school communities can flourish.

The Department's Complex Matters Support Team (CMST) was established to provide greater support to principals to manage ongoing complex correspondence from parents or school community members. The CMST works to reduce principal stress and workload, and support wellbeing by collaborating with the principal to resolve complex incidents, preparing responses to complex and frequent correspondence from parents, and providing access to meaningful resources, advice and support.

The CMST aims to reduce additional workload and stress experienced by principals by directly supporting principals to navigate complex matters and providing a central point of contact for principals to access the resources that they need.

How does the Complex Matters Support Team work?

When a principal experiences complex and ongoing correspondence from a parent or community member, which they require additional support in navigating, they can make direct contact with the CMST and report the incident to the team.

When an incident is brought to the CMST, a Lead Professional from the team liaises with the principal to understand their context, and the issue itself, before identifying what action needs to be undertaken by the team to connect the principal to the appropriate supports.

Based on their understanding of the incident, the Lead Professional will then coordinate and connect the principal with the appropriate supports from the Region as well as various program areas across the Department. The designated Lead Professional will act as a principal's single point of contact until the matter is resolved.

The Lead Professional can assist in the preparation of responses to parent correspondence, draft newsletter pieces, help prepare meeting agendas and speaking lines for dealing with complex issues. When doing this work the Lead Professional always considers how to improve communications and strengthen the relationships between the school and the family involved.

The Lead Professional allocated to the case may conduct a school visit to gain further understanding of the situation and provide appropriate support and resources.

In addition to responding to ongoing complex correspondence on the principal's behalf, the CMST endeavours to use their knowledge of the Department and numerous processes, teams and resources that can be drawn upon to ensure principal wellbeing is supported and protected.

Establishing the Complex Matter Support Team

Challenging interactions with parents and other school community members, as well as high work demands, impact the health and wellbeing of principals. The CMST aims to provide the necessary support to ensure that the wellbeing of principals is protected. For many principals, a key contributing factor in reported reduction in wellbeing was the pressure and stress related to the need to respond to ongoing and complex correspondence from school parents/carers and/or advocates. While the challenge of responding to complex and often aggressive emails itself was time consuming and had negative impacts on wellbeing, principals also reported feeling overwhelmed by finding the right person within the Department to access support.

Criteria for referral to the Complex Matters Support Team

An essential part of developing the CMST was establishing clear criteria for its involvement in school issues and communicating this widely and consistently to principals and Departmental staff in the regional and central offices. This not only helped to establish the purpose of the team itself, but also establish clear boundaries around when involvement was necessary and appropriate.

In order for the CMST to become formally involved in a matter it must be: “an issue where there is complex, ongoing and vexatious correspondence that is challenging to respond to and has multiple areas of the Department involved that require coordination”.

Clear criteria has helped to ensure that cases are taken on by the CMST in a manner that is sustainable, and which maximises the team’s ability to meaningfully support principals.

The CMST has a ‘no wrong door’ policy for principals contacting the team. If the matter referred to the CMST doesn’t fit the criteria for a CMST response, the CMST will support the principal by connecting them with the most appropriate area of the Department. This usually involves a ‘warm referral’ without the need for the principal to retell the details of the matter.

Providing support - Internal partnerships

There is substantial variation in who is involved in managing issues escalated to the CMST, due to the complexity of the incidents themselves and the diverse range of teams within the Department that can offer guidance and advice. As the CMST has existing relationships with key areas in the Department, and a sound understanding of the support that can be provided, they are able to match the needs of each case to the appropriate team. In this way, the CMST acts as a central point of contact and liaison between various areas of the Department and schools to ensure that resolution of complex matters can occur.

Impact and feedback

Working to resolve a complex matter is a dynamic process, and each matter takes a varying amount of time and involvement to reach a resolution. When a complex matter is officially closed by the CMST, evaluation forms are provided to the principal and all other relevant individuals involved to receive feedback and measure the team’s impact. Overall, feedback from schools and principals related to the involvement of the team has been overwhelmingly positive.

Much of the positive feedback is attributed to the structure of the team itself which, while small, is purposefully made up of a diverse range of backgrounds and professions, from social workers and lawyers to teachers. It is the ability to utilise a range of expertise from this diverse mix of professions that the CMST believes has made the greatest impact, in addition to the benefit of providing principals with support regarding complex matters from committed experts who are not line managers.

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We regularly get thank you letters, and there has been some lovely feedback, particularly from new principals who have only been in the job 1-2 years, saying “I don’t think I would still be in the job if it wasn’t for the support that this team is giving.

Stakeholder

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It’s quite an isolating role being a principal. Principals look after everyone else and can’t always share worries and concerns, so having someone who can sit outside of this and can be objective can be very helpful.

Stakeholder

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Key Lessons

Utilise pre-existing expertise

The CMST is committed to building relationships with other teams with prior involvement with schools, and utilising the vast expertise that exists within the Department. This approach has enabled the CMST to utilise resources that are often already established within schools and the Department, and in some cases taking on a coordination role and supporting existing initiatives and expertise to resolve a complex matter, rather than 'reinventing the wheel'.

Empower principals

Through their ongoing work and engagement with schools, the CMST aims to empower principals throughout the case resolution process. In some instances, the team expressed that involvement with an incident can be most meaningful when it empowers the principal themselves to feel more confident in building positive relationships and managing challenging incidents, with a focus on capacity building.

"We want to ensure this is a capacity building process not a disempowering one" – Stakeholder

The importance of school visits

School visits allow the CMST to gain an understanding of each principals' school context, and build trusting and authentic relationships with school staff. The team will often make a concerted effort at the start of a matter to go out to the school, meet the principal face to face, and gain some perspective at the ground level. This face-to-face interaction can provide connection in situations where principals are often needing to be vulnerable.

"A simple visit, a cup of tea and a chat to develop rapport with a principal can make a world of difference" – Stakeholder.

The future of the Complex Matters Support Team

Despite still being a relatively new team, the CMST are already able to share learnings with other teams within in the Department and are working to refine a number of processes that have come into effect since the beginning of 2020 and during COVID-19.

It is hoped that future focus can be shifted within the Department to focus on early intervention, positive relationships with school communities and proactive supports particularly regarding inclusion and disability. This may also include the development of regional Complex Matters Support Teams, which can be tailored to the unique context of each region to ensure the highest possible level of support for principals and school leaders.