24 June 2010

Ms Karen Ellingford
Executive Officer
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne  Vic  3002

Dear Ms Ellingford,

Re: Parliamentary inquiry into the potential for developing opportunities for schools to become a focus for promoting healthy community living

Thank you for the opportunity for Gippsland Women’s Health Service (GWHS) to provide a submission to the Victorian Education and Training Committee in regard to the above.

Gippsland Women’s Health Service is an independent regional service providing health promotion, advocacy, health information, referral, education and resources to women of all ages and organisations throughout Gippsland. Our work takes the Service across a range of settings, including schools, where we deliver information to both girls and boys in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, prevention of violence against women and mental health and wellbeing. Over a period of years, GWHS has delivered many programs and projects within the school environment and listed below is an outline of some of the more recent programs that the Service has undertaken.

Sexual & Reproductive Health

- **Sexual and Reproductive Health Regional Strategy**
  In response to a growing need within the Gippsland region, GWHS has led the development of a regional Sexual and Reproductive Health Promotion Strategy. The framework for this strategy, which has been developed in conjunction with the Gippsland regional office of the Department of Health, encourages cross-sectoral collaboration, with involvement of representatives from health, education, family planning, government and community services. The aim of the regional strategy is to develop a comprehensive, evidence-based approach that will direct and inform health promotion activity for sexual and reproductive health, with a particular focus on:
  - Reducing the incidence of Chlamydia infection in young people, and
  - Reducing the rate of teenage pregnancy.

Objectives of the program are:
1. By June 30 2012 improve equitable access and information to target groups around the following:
   - Knowledge and access to health care services
   - Knowledge and access to sexuality education
   - Access to screening
2. By June 30 2012, primary and secondary schools in Gippsland will provide sexuality education in a consistent manner and aligned with best practice.
3. By June 30 2012, enhance the skills and knowledge of people working in the community sector to deliver sexuality education.
Gippsland has almost double the teenage pregnancy rate of the Victorian average, and rates of Chlamydia infection have been increasing at a dramatic rate in the last 10-20 years, particularly in the 15 – 29 year old age group. In the past, health promotion around sexual and reproductive health has been relatively ad hoc and there is no consistent approach to sexuality education in secondary schools in Victoria. To this end, comprehensive strategies have been developed to address each of these objectives and two working groups have been established to implement relevant initiatives within both school and community environments. A copy of the strategy and any other additional information in this regard can be provided on request.

- **Education Sessions delivered within the classroom context by the GWHS Community Health Nurse**
  - Puberty sessions to Primary school years 5 and 6
  - Sexual and Reproductive Health, generally to years 9, 10 and 11, but can be tailored and delivered to young secondary school students as required.

These sessions are delivered in response to requests from teachers, welfare coordinators and/or school nurses and are designed to support curriculum based programs, as well as to build the capacity of teachers, particularly in the areas of identification of skill and knowledge gaps of the students and where issues have arisen within the school and it is felt that additional external expertise would be beneficial in assisting staff to deal with these matters.

- **S&RH Education Program**

  In conjunction with the development of the regional S&RH strategy, GWHS received funding from the Mind the Gap Project (Family Planning Victoria) and School Focussed Youth Services to partner with *Phunktional* to deliver a Gippsland Roadshow of the performance *Love Drunk*, an issues-focused theatre program dealing with youth culture, relationships, sexual health and diversity to all year 9 – 12 students at Orbost Secondary College, Cann River P-12 and Swifts Creek Secondary, which are located in remote, rural East Gippsland. A performance was also held for all Year 9 students at Trafalgar High School located in West Gippsland.

  Health professionals from Gippsland Women’s Health Service, Orbost Regional Health, Gippsland Centre against Sexual Assault and the Cann River Police were also in attendance to facilitate discussion after the performance. This performance was extremely well received by students and teaching staff alike and provided excellent opportunities for ongoing discussion about these topics within the schools as well as assisting to facilitate relationships with the school and other community based services.

- **Respectful Relationship Education In Schools (Prevention of Violence Program)**

  Family violence has a significant impact on families and, in particular children and young people. An estimated one in four Victorian children and young people have witnessed family violence. Family Violence is present in more than half of all notifications received by Child Protection in Victoria. Children exposed to family violence have increased risk of behavioural and learning difficulties as a result of witnessing or experiencing family violence. During 2005 GWHS conducted research into the education of young people with regard to family violence. Survey results from 32 of the 35 registered secondary schools indicated that, while there was a strong commitment from school staff to assist students with these health related issues, there was a need for professional development and curriculum resource provision. Further to this the schools recognised the need for support to deliver respectful relationship education that could appropriately cover the complex issue of family violence.

  The Respectful Relationship Education In Schools (RREIS) program, which is included in each of the Gippsland Primary Care Partnership catchment health promotion plans, aims to build the capacity of secondary school communities to reduce the impact of family violence on young people and implement a sustainable healthy relationships program as a strategic means to prevent intimate partner violence occurring in young people’s lives and the impact of young people witnessing family violence in their homes. To date, the program has been delivered in varying degrees across nine schools in Gippsland, from presentations to staff,
targeted professional development for school staff, assistance with school policy review and student classroom delivery.

The program enables GWHS to work with the school community and other local community service providers to develop strategies that will look at preventing violence before it occurs, take action on early signs of violence and take action after violence has occurred to prevent its re-occurrence. The program design is based on a 'whole of school' model for working in schools from the VicHealth Report; ‘Preventing violence before it occurs – A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women’ and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development released a report in August 2009, authored by VicHealth titled “Respectful Relationships Education, Violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian secondary schools”, which provides the framework for schools and highlights the work currently undertaken by GWHS. The RREIS program also fits within the framework outlined in Victoria’s recently released statewide plan to prevent violence against women, “A Right to Respect” and is also consistent with the Victorian Government’s Integrated Family Violence Reform Strategy, "A Right to Safety and Justice". GWHS participated in the education working group during the development of this statewide plan and was also a member of the Partners in Prevention statewide network which looked at strengthening the delivery and evaluation of schools based violence prevention programs.

The Respectful Relationship Education in Schools program provides the school with knowledge of family violence issues, identifies resources and referral pathways, builds the capacity of the school community to implement a respectful relationship program and builds the capacity of the school to respond to any issues of family violence. The delivery of respectful relationship education sessions to students builds their individual capacity to make healthy choices about their own relationships during these formative years. The work undertaken in Orbost Secondary College coincided with a full review of their health curriculum, which now includes healthy relationships across the year levels, together with an internal school policy and procedure review to better equip the school to deal with this issue.

To support sustainability of this model, a manual which includes copies of student programs, DVD and other resource material to support the respectful relations education program within schools has been developed and a copy of this manual is given to the school at the conclusion of our direct involvement. We also remain available for reference and support to school staff as they continue to implement the program.

In recent months, GWHS has given presentations on this program at the Gippsland Regional Health Promotion Conference and the National Women’s Health Conference. Evaluation reports and additional information in relation to this program is also available from GWHS on request.

- **Minimising the Harmful Effects of Alcohol Consumption**

A significant project that GWHS undertook within the school environment relates to working with young people to address the risk taking behaviours associated with alcohol consumption. The *Girls on the Edge* postcard project focussed on 3 secondary schools in Gippsland – Yarram Secondary College, Leongatha Secondary College and Swifts Creek Secondary College – as well as a young mother’s group at Berry Street Victoria’s agency in Morwell. The culmination of the project was the development of eight postcards, copies of which are available on the GWHS website. Following the completion of the initial phase, a set of posters was also developed from the cards as an adjunct to the original project.

The overall aim of the project was *To improve the health and wellbeing of young women in Gippsland through increased awareness of the risks associated with alcohol*. Whilst the focus of our Service is on the health and wellbeing of women of all ages, we recognized the significant impact of alcohol on the lives of all young people and consequently our work in schools was delivered via classroom and curriculum activities to both boys and girls and is reflected in the final designs of the postcards.

The project was developed in response to formal evidence based reports in relation to this issue as well as anecdotal evidence gathered by this Service which showed that young
women were engaging in unsafe sex and drinking at parties and school events such as school socials and post debutante ball parties. This art based project was developed within a harm minimisation framework and involved young people and a graphic artist to design postcards depicting safe sex/safe partying messages for display and free distribution in places that are accessed by young people, as well as providing health education within the classroom by the GWHS community health nurse. Evidence has shown that school-based health education is an effective drug and alcohol intervention. Interactive methods which engage people have found the most favour with drug educators and show potential and sustainable benefit.

The Girls on the Edge postcard project was the result of a collaborative effort between GWHS, Secondary Schools in isolated parts of Gippsland, a Welfare organisation, a local graphic artist and the Latrobe Regional Gallery. This cross sectoral approach between health, community, education and the art sector proved to be an interesting and very worthwhile process. The GWHS community health nurse ran interactive mythbusting sessions with both male and female students on the effects of alcohol and the graphic artist ran sessions on how to effectively design the postcards according to the brief. The young people then designed postcards with ongoing mentoring from the graphic artist and their teachers. Focus groups of local students helped select the eight designs chosen for print and a successful launch was held at Latrobe Regional Gallery and was attended by over 100 people. In addition to the student based information sessions, GWHS conducted interactive parent mythbusting sessions at two schools, which enabled the adults to challenge their knowledge and beliefs about young people and alcohol and increase their understanding about ways to discuss this issue with their children.

Evaluation of this project demonstrated a significant increase in knowledge and awareness among young people of the effects of risk taking behaviour associated with alcohol and the resources that have been developed continue to be distributed and used by schools and youth centres to engage with young people in regard to this issue.

- Mental Health & Wellbeing – Body Image

Body Brains and Beauty Project
Research has shown that poor body image can adversely affect the mental health and wellbeing of young women. In an effort to stem the rising issue of body dissatisfaction in young women, Gippsland Women’s Health Service developed the Body, Brains and Beauty Project to provide young women with knowledge and strategies that would promote positive self esteem and a healthy acceptance of their bodies. As part of the project, Gippsland Women’s Health Service engaged Anthea Paul, author of the ‘Girlosophy’ series of books, to address young women at 5 secondary school sessions and 3 Mother Daughter evenings. The sessions encouraged the girls to celebrate their individuality, focus on being healthy and foster support and acceptance of each other.

Participants from the project were encouraged to complete pre-session surveys to determine their level of self esteem and body satisfaction. These results varied amongst school groups and geographical location and responses were spread widely across the continuum. Whilst, the issues of dieting and lack of participation in physical activity in relation to body image were not identified as major issues, in contrast, issues such as poor self esteem and bullying were shown to be a real concern for many of the young women and were consistently raised as issues during the sessions. Post-session surveys revealed that the project contributed positively to the self esteem levels of the girls. Parent evaluations revealed that the project had provided an opportunity for more open communication between parents and daughters about body image issues.

Interest in the project was overwhelming from both the education sector and the general community. The project identified that body image and self esteem continues to be an area of interest and concern for parents, teachers and young women. Feedback from the project revealed that there is widespread interest for future projects that address these issues. Bullying was also identified as an issue by the girls, parents and teachers and should be included in any future project work focussing on self esteem.
Case for Self Esteem Project
Following information sessions conducted at three Gippsland schools, and in response to teachers / staff requests for additional useful resources to assist them in teaching and discussing body image and self esteem, GWHS developed a Case for Self Esteem, a resource pack which includes a range of support material which can be easily utilised for this purpose. Funding from the Department of Planning and Community Development through their positive body image grant program assisted with this project.

In addition to the resource pack, GWHS also conducted a professional education session for school staff (teachers, welfare staff and school nurses) with guest presenter, Dr Jennifer O’Dea, who provided training on her teaching resource “Everybody’s Different”. A case for self esteem resource pack, including a copy of this book, was provided to all participants. Evaluation of the event showed that the majority of participants found the workshop was useful and appropriate, the information presented interesting and relevant, that they were more knowledgeable about body image and self esteem and more comfortable in discussing these issues with students.

In addition to the programs and projects listed above, GWHS has participated in a number of other collaborative projects that have been initiated by other organisations, including the G-Connect project at Yarram Secondary College. GWHS believes that a partnership based approach between schools and community based organisations provides opportunities to utilise external expertise to support school based initiatives to improve the health and wellbeing of students and staff, thereby strengthening the capacity within the school to deliver comprehensive, integrated programs and creating a more sustainable approach. Further, these partnerships and joint activities provide opportunities for students and staff to better understand and become familiar with the organisations and services available within their local communities.

The role of welfare staff and school nurses is invaluable in supporting these initiatives and GWHS believes it is important to strengthen and expand the capacity of these positions within the curriculum framework of all schools to ensure a health promoting school model is successful. In addition, consideration should be given to directly supporting health promotion positions in schools to bring additional expertise which, together with the consolidation and inclusion of health and wellbeing programs within the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, would further enhance the health promoting schools model. School based health promotion workers would be able to directly link with existing networks and partnerships, including the Primary Care Partnerships, which would foster greater collaboration between schools and community based organisations.

Yours sincerely

Diane Wilkinson
Chief Executive Officer