



The argument for describing an appropriate ratio of students to house parents

Student : teacher ratios

There is very little documented literature or discussion on student to houseparent ratios, however ratios are often discussed and reported on in allied fields such as student : teacher ratios in schools. Around Australia, ratios vary by state and from private to public models, and are quoted to be as low as 12 students per teacher in Secondary schools in some states. These quoted ratios in Education statistics can however be misleading because of the way they are calculated. In reality, it would be rare for an individual class student : teacher ratio to be this low, as face to face class numbers are much larger.

A 2014 UNESCO around the world list for Primary pupil : teacher ratios by country shows the UK ratio as 17 -18:1 and United States as 14:1, with other developed countries such as Sweden and Norway as low as 9:1. This shows the frailty of quoting ratios that do not give exact descriptors of how they are calculated, for instance whether support staff and Principals are included in the ratio.

Boarding ratios

It is rare for any standard or regulator to commit to a minimum or ideal ratio in student boarding. The Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Council, in their Position Paper on Boarding Schools, has referred to a usual ratio in most boarding schools as 25:1 and gone on record recommending that for Indigenous students with high needs, the ratio of students to boarding staff should be 8 - 10 to 1.

*"... if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are going to be successful at boarding school, there are some policy issues especially around resourcing, in need of urgent modification. The student/houseparent ratio for Indigenous students needs to be **acknowledged as requiring to be about 8-10:1 rather than the 25:1 ratio on which most boarding schools operate**, in recognition of the high demand nature of the special care and interventions needed to successfully transition these students."*

The factors involved

In considering the ratio of students to houseparents the following issues must be considered:

1. Experience, qualifications and skills of staff (including First Aid qualifications)
2. Extra duties required of the staff in addition to supervision and program provision (e.g. sport or swimming supervision, meal preparation, transport to external sport, health care, homework supervision, cleaning or laundry etc)
3. Age, maturity and gender (mixed or not) of students in Residence
4. Number of students with high needs e.g. physical or behavioural disabilities, at-risk family or cultural backgrounds,
5. Support staff available eg counsellor, nurse, admin support, bus driver, security staff, fulltime Head of Boarding/Residence Manager
6. Physical structure and security of the Residence e.g. lockdown with fire release doors, on-duty security at nights, style and spread of buildings, Residential environment e.g. remote, city, access to medical services, etc
7. Residence model, vision and aims e.g. family group home model, traditional English boarding school model of teachers supervising after-hours, or a youth work model.

Other considerations

Any discussion about ratios must **define** what the ratio actually means. In Australia the ratio means the number of staff whose primary responsibility is to care for the students. If a residence has 50 students with three boarding staff on duty caring for the students, but one of those staff members is driving student to doctors appointments and sport training etc, then the ratio would realistically be 25 to 1.

The other consideration is the time of the day and how this relates to student needs. When students are sleeping or when engaged in a well-structured routine, there may not be the same ratio needed as on the weekend or when students return from school through homework/prep time to lights out. Some times need a lower student : staff ratio than others.

Another factor that must be considered is the residence budget. Most residences would probably prefer to have a lower student : staff ratio but they cannot afford the additional staff.

Feedback from staff

Boarding Training Australia ran an informal discussion in our newsletter in 2014 about student : staff ratios and the responses varied greatly. One houseparent in a high-needs residence stated that any ratio higher than 10 : 1 is **negligent**. Another said they have very self reliant, self-managing students and their ratio is 65 : 1 and they consider that they have **adequate** duty of care. It was apparent that there were very divergent views on student : staff ratios and that the needs of students varied greatly.

Our position

Considering all of these factors and different models, in our experience, we believe:

1. With standards and regulation developing in the boarding industry there needs to be some minimum prescribed ratios for different models and contexts
2. The best supervisory model for a boarding residence is where the ratio of house parents to students is such that **the staff feel they can provide an adequate duty of care**, while maintaining a secure, supportive, environment with professional, caring relationships that nurture and develop all students. Supervisory staff will know best if, for their context, the ratio is inadequate, satisfactory or optimum. Management must be guided by those who are in the daily action.
3. The house parents have **specific training and induction** to equip them for their role and appropriate structures and support staff to enable them to access the extra help some students need.
4. For a residence with these appropriate structures, staffing and supports, and with a majority of self-managing students (not a large number of very young, high-needs or non-compliant students), **an appropriate ratio is around 15 -20 students to 1 house parent**, during the average week day program.
5. The ratio of house parents to students should be higher for those residences;
 - with complex weekend programs
 - with a significant number of younger students,
 - with more challenging behaviours or high-needs students, or high student turnover
 - in remote or more challenging locations,
 - with leadership or structural inadequacies
 - with inexperienced, untrained staff or a high staff turnover

(* Our experience: over 35 years in both public and private sector education in Australia (including 27 years in boarding), and 5 years training Boarding staff in Certificate IV and Diploma qualifications in over 50 Boarding schools and student Residences around Australia, and in 4 residences internationally)