SCHOOL chaplaincy: DISPELLING myths & ANSWERING questions

There has been a flurry of discussion in the media about school chaplaincy following the May federal budget — a lot of discussion, but also a lot of misinformation.

Here are the facts:

Hasn't the High Court stopped school chaplaincy?

No. In 2012, the High Court ruled unanimously that there is no constitutional problem with chaplains serving in government schools. Because of how the chaplaincy programme works, there is no problem of church-state separation.[1]

The 2014 High Court decision is only about the funding model — whether federal funds can be paid directly to chaplaincy providers, or whether the funding should be through state/territory grants. Federal funding for school chaplaincy can continue as states/territory grants. This was acknowledged by the High Court in 2012 and 2014.[2]

Aren't school chaplains just out to convert students to religion?

No. Chaplains are required to be non-judgmental, non-coercive and support all students regardless of the student's issues or worldview. If they fail in this, they answer to the school, the relevant state/territory education department, the federal government and their employer.

Every school chaplain signs a binding national code of conduct, with serious disciplinary consequences if it is contravened. If there is a problem, it is dealt with swiftly and decisively.

The national rate is 13 complaints of proselytising per annum (three year average). With 2,900 schools having chaplains, the rate of proselytising complaints is 0.4 per cent per annum, and has been declining year on year. In 2013, there was one complaint nationally.[3]

Are school chaplains qualified?

Yes. All SU QLD Chaplains hold a minimum Certificate IV in Youth Work and also hold, or are working towards, a Diploma Youth Work, or hold a higher qualification in a relevant field (e.g. Education, Social Work, Counselling, Psychology).

Student Welfare Workers are not social workers. They are held to the same standard of qualifications as chaplains (Certificate IV or higher)

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1   *Williams v Commonwealth of Australia* [2012] HCA 23, decided 20 June 2012 (**Williams No.1**). The 2014 case is due to be decided on 19 June — High Court of Australia matter S154 of 2013 filed 8 August 2013 (**Williams No.2**).

2   See Gummow and Bell JJ in Williams No.1 at paragraph 91 and the proposition Chief Justice French put on 7 May 2014 during the hearing of Williams No.2, *'The section 96 grant [to the states] could be conditional on adherence to national uniform standards and administration by Commonwealth agencies, could it not?'*

3   These are government figures supplied at the Senate estimates hearing on 4 June 2014, reported at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/09/complaints-about-school-chaplaincy-programme-on-the-decline-figures-show (accessed 14 June 2014).

Shouldn't the federal money be spent on psychologists instead?

School chaplains and psychologists perform different, but complementary, functions. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Mental health issues are tragically high among young people. Clearly, some need the help of mental health professionals for treatment and case management. Some young people need treatment, but all young people need support to avoid mental health issues arising in the first place — prevention for all, treatment for some.

Young people get this support from their school chaplain — a trusted, caring and affirming presence in school, with time and training to listen and support appropriately, as well as to run programmes to develop self-esteem, grow peer support, deal with grief and loss and build personal resilience.

All chaplains are trained to a nationally recognised standard in how to recognise mental health issues in young people and to refer appropriately to other care professionals.

Figure 1
In mental health terms, school chaplaincy works towards promoting protective factors (such as those outlined in Table 1 on page 6), engaging in activities that are preventive and assisting with early intervention and referral, as illustrated below — a so-called PPEI model of care:
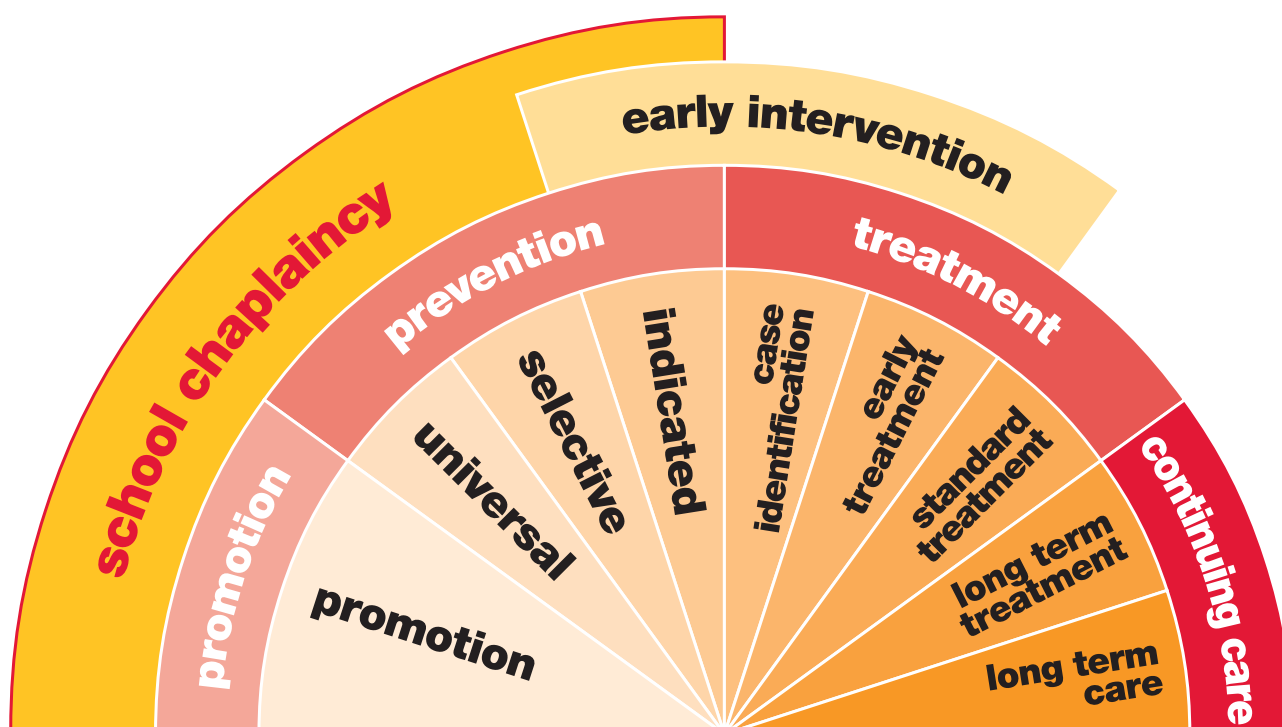
spectrum of mental health intervention

[Adapted from Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994[4]]

This complements the role of psychologists in providing treatment and continuing care.

4   PJ Mrazek and RJ Haggerty, *Reducing the Risks for Mental Disorders: Frontiers for Preventive Intervention Research* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1994). It is this model relied on in the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (2000) — see reference in Table 1.

Why does this need to be done by religious workers?

The role of school chaplain is to provide social, emotional and spiritual support to students, regardless of whether the student has a particular faith.

Chaplaincy is non-coercive, but it recognises the importance of spirituality for young people. Promoting positive spirituality for children and young people is important for their overall development.[5] This is recognised in state education department wellbeing frameworks.

Spirituality is not meant to be something strange or foreign to us, but something vital that pulls together the various facets of our lives in meaningful ways. Spirituality is about a way of seeing the world and, even more importantly, being in the world. Positive spirituality has been shown to contribute to positive health and wellbeing, recovery from illness, and long life.[6]

School chaplains engage around questions of beliefs, values and ethics; help students explore spiritual identity; provide a spiritual / religious perspective on relevant issues; liaise with local spiritual and religious groups; and support students and the school community in times of grief and loss when some of the big questions of life arise for them. Chaplains ensure that spirituality is not forgotten as an essential part of people's overall wellbeing.

Why is this relevant in a schools context — isn't it something for home?

Several studies around the world have shown that a school-based resource which focuses on social, emotional and spiritual support, as school chaplaincy does, has positive educational impacts, including significantly improved academic achievement.[7]

How can a chaplain support students with issues of sexuality, drug use or pregnancy?

School chaplains support many students with these issues. The school chaplaincy role is about being caring, supportive and non-judgmental. Chaplains are there to help practically, not condemn. That is part of the binding national code of conduct — with serious disciplinary consequences if it is contravened.

How can the Federal Government spend $245 million on this?

The total federal funding is spread across 4 years from 2015, and is for 2,900 schools. That equates to $20,000 per school per annum, with an additional $4,000 for schools in remote areas.

From 2015, the new programme reduces the number of funded places by 20%, delivering to the government a saving of approximately $14.7 million per annum, or $58.8 million over the life of the programme.

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5   The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals, which is foundational in the Australian Education system, recognises the importance of spirituality in the holistic development of children and young people. Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, *Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians* (MCEECDYA, 2008), p4.

6   Cornah, D. (2006), *The Impact of Spirituality on Mental Health: A Review of the Literature*. London: Mental Health Foundation.

7   Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger (2011), *The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions*, Child Development, 82(1), pp405–432.

Aren't government schools meant to be secular?

Australian schools aspire to create 'successful learners ... [who] are able to *make sense of their world* ... [and] manage their emotional, mental, *spiritual* and physical wellbeing ... [who are] active and informed citizens ... [who] *appreciate* Australia's social, cultural, linguistic and *religious diversity*, ... history and culture'.[8]

This requires a school environment where all views of religion — atheism as well as faiths — can coexist respectfully and with mutual understanding. That is not achieved by denying a student the opportunity to explore spirituality, nor by relegating spirituality solely to home life. This is recognised by the Australian Human Rights Commission[9] and by the European Court of Human Rights:

> *"Neutrality requires a pluralist approach on the part of the State, not a secularist one. It encourages respect for all worldviews rather than a preference for one. … A preference for secularism over alternative world views — whether religious, philosophical or otherwise — is not a neutral option."*[10]

I thought no-one wanted school chaplaincy

Participation in the school chaplaincy programme is voluntary. 2,900 schools have chosen to have a chaplain, after a process of consultation within the school community. If more funding was available, many more schools would seek a school chaplain.

There have been two university studies, in 2009 and 2012, which demonstrate that schools overwhelmingly value the role their school chaplains perform.

The most recent study looked at a wide group of stakeholders including school principals, teachers, parents (including regional indigenous parents), students, psychologists and professional associations such as primary and secondary school associations, Parents and Citizens Associations and the Department of Education in Western Australia. In that group, 96 per cent of respondents supported the work of school chaplains and agreed that the chaplains' work as members of a student support services team was valued.[11]

In that study, among school staff (including principals and teachers):
- (a) 82 per cent indicated that the social and emotional support provided by school chaplains to students had a considerable positive impact;
- (b) 83 per cent indicated that school chaplains helped to build up students' confidence to a considerable extent;
- (c) 72 per cent considered the programmes that the school chaplains ran helped to develop students' self-esteem;
- (d) 80 per cent responded that students from culturally and linguistically diverse communities were assisted; and
- (e) 81 per cent concluded that students who were experiencing grief and loss or facing relationship difficulties were helped.

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8   *Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians* (MCEECDYA, 2008), p8–9.

9   Australian Human Rights Commission (2011), *Freedom of religion and belief in 21st Century Australia*, p80. At https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/frb/Report_2011.pdf (Accessed at 14 June 2014).

10   *Lautsi v Italy*, Appl. No. 30814/06, Grand Chamber (18 March 2011), per Judge Power.

11   A 30–month longitudinal study of school chaplaincy by the Research Centre for Vulnerable Children and Families at the University of Western Australia, led by Associate Professor Maria Harries OA: Harries, Cant, Lavery, Philips and Di Risio, *Evaluation of YouthCARE Chaplaincy Service in Western Australia*, University of Western Australia, 2012, ch4. At http://www.youthcare.org.au/images/Evaluation_of_YouthCARE_Chap_Serv__WA_2012.pdf (accessed 27 May 2014).

Does my child have a choice about school chaplaincy?

Student participation in any religious aspects of the school chaplaincy programme requires consent, so that parents and students have a choice. Chaplains also help schools deliver non-religious wellbeing programmes to build a positive school environment and to promote social skills and connectedness of students. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Thousands of students every day benefit from the care and support of school chaplains.

Table 1
Protective factors potentially influencing the development of mental health problems and mental disorders in individuals (particularly children).

The factors school chaplains assist with are highlighted in orange.

Individual factors	Family factors	School context	Life events and situations	Community and cultural factors
• easy temperament • adequate nutrition • attachment to family • above-average intelligence • school achievement • **problem-solving skills** • **internal locus of control** • **social competence** • **social skills** • **good coping style** • **optimism** • **moral beliefs** • **values** • **positive self-related cognitions**	• supportive, caring parents • family harmony • secure and stable family • small family size • more than two years between siblings • responsibility within the family (for child or adult) • supportive relationship with other adult (for child or adult) • strong family norms and morality	• **sense of belonging** • **positive school climate** • **prosocial peer group** • **required responsibility and helpfulness** • **opportunities for some success and recognition of achievement** • **school norms against violence**	• **involvement with significant other person (partner / mentor)** • availability of opportunities at critical turning points or major life transitions • economic security • good physical health	• **sense of connectedness** • **attachment to and networks within the community** • **participation in church or other community group** • strong cultural identity and ethnic pride • **access to support services** • **community / cultural norms against violence**

[From Department of Health and Aged Care (2000), *Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health — A Monograph*, Mental Health and Special Programmes Branch, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, p15. Emphasis added]