

# School Chaplaincy and the Wellbeing of Young People

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Two distinctives of SU QLD Chaplaincy are its emphases on spirituality and its focus on pastoral care. Both of these characteristics highlight the unique contribution Chaplaincy makes in promoting the wellbeing of young people in Queensland state schools.

There is a growing awareness of the links between spirituality and positive outcomes for young people and communities, particularly in the areas of education and mental health. The 2008 “Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians” states that schools play a vital role in ensuring the economic prosperity and social cohesion of Australia through “promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, *spiritual* and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians” (1). Spirituality is central to our wellbeing and an emphasis on spirituality lies at the heart of Chaplaincy. As such, Chaplains have an important role to play in helping schools to help young people live meaningful lives and to make meaningful contributions in their communities.

Spirituality can be understood to be a connection between people and the divine, other people and the world around them. For decades, the Youth Work field and other Human Services fields have not been sure of what to do with spirituality. As a result, they have largely carved it out of their models used to engage with young people and their wellbeing. But there is growing realisation of how important spirituality is to the overall mental health and wellbeing of young people (2). Chaplaincy places a high value on spirituality and as such, is an expression of truly holistic Youth Work practice, valuing the place of spirituality in the lives of young people and maximising the benefits of positive spirituality for their overall wellbeing.

Chaplaincy has long been identified with effective, compassionate pastoral care. Over the last few decades, mental health professionals have come to understand an effective mental health response as existing along a continuum of mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention, intervention and treatment (3). Effective mental health does not just involve competent counsellors and case managers responding to issues as they arise, but other professionals working towards building strong relationships and a culture of compassionate care. Chaplains are staff who can play this role in schools. They are a constant, dedicated and direct caring presence for young people in schools and this has been shown, time and time again, to be a major protective factor for the wellbeing of young people (4). So many reports on the mental health and wellbeing of young people cry out for youth work services that are informal, flexible, and accessible to young people so that effective mental health services can be delivered (5). Chaplaincy is this type of service in schools, providing a vital gateway between young people in schools and the mental health services they do not otherwise make use of.

Chaplains appreciate that the lives of young people can only be understood in the context of their families and peers, as well as their community and cultural influences. For this reason, Chaplains promote relationships and connectedness beyond themselves. They are a conduit for connectedness through the facilitation of fun activities, groups, mentoring and referral, connecting young people to other young people, adults, organisations and resources that can make a difference in their lives. Beyond direct support to young people, Chaplains also provide connections and support for families and staff members, contributing to the wellbeing of the whole school community.

In recent research on the effectiveness of Chaplaincy, 98% of School Principals said that Chaplaincy did not duplicate any other services provided to young people in their schools (6). This is because Chaplaincy has unique things to offer. It complements the range of support services available to young people in schools that exist to promote their mental health and wellbeing.

## References

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5. NMHWG (2004) *Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Young People in Australia: discussion paper, principles and strategies*. Canberra: Australian Government. (pp 19-24).
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