# THE EFFECTS OF PASTORAL CARE WORKERS ON STUDENT WELLBEING IN REGIONAL AND METROPOLITAN SCHOOLS

*Final report*

Hearing Country Voices Research Partnership Report no. 12

Prepared by the Centre for Social Impact
*March, 2022*

Uniting CountrySA

CENTRE for SOCIAL IMPACT | Flinders UNIVERSITY

# Acknowledgements

### Acknowledgement of Country

Flinders University was established on the lands of the Kaurna nation, with the first University campus, Bedford Park, located on the ancestral body of Ngannu near Warriparinga. Warriparinga is a significant site in the complex and multi-layered Dreaming of the Kaurna ancestor, Tjilbruke. For the Kaurna nation, Tjilbruke was a keeper of the fire and a peace maker/law maker. Tjilbruke is part of the living culture and traditions of the Kaurna people. His spirit lives in the Land and Waters, in the Kaurna people and in the glossy ibis (known as Tjilbruke for the Kaurna). Through Tjilbruke, the Kaurna people continue their creative relationship with their Country, its spirituality and its stories.

Flinders University acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians, both past and present, of the various locations the University operates on, and recognises their continued relationship and responsibility to these Lands and waters.

(Flinders University Reconciliation Action Plan May 2020-May 2022)

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### Centre for Social Impact

The Centre for Social Impact (CSI) is a national research and education centre dedicated to catalysing social change for a better world. CSI is built on the foundation of four of Australia's leading universities: UNSW Sydney, Swinburne University of Technology, The University of Western Australia, and Flinders University. Our research develops and brings together knowledge to understand current social challenges and opportunities; our postgraduate and undergraduate education develops social impact leaders; and we aim to catalyse change by drawing on these foundations and translating knowledge, creating leaders, developing usable resources, and reaching across traditional divides to facilitate collaborations.

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### Picture on front cover

Photo provided by Catherine Mackenzie

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*It's the importance of just being there, the fact that you're there. Consistently, that you're a consistent person, that you're being yourself and the other thing equally as important is just to trust your instincts (Lily, PCW)*

*If they're feeling welcomed, if they're feeling cared for and supported, it helps them build that confidence and to build those skills. [PCW] makes herself pretty familiar, really quickly, well known to our new families (Martin, school principal)*

*It's all about the rapport building. That's the one thing that I've found is that you can't just walk in and expect to change a kid's life. You've got to build that relationship with them (Kayla, PCW)*

*If the explosion turns into violence -I don't get any choice but to suspend them from school - but all that's doing is keeping everyone else safe at this point in time because there's no outside agencies we can refer them to who have the expertise the help some of these kids (Peter, school principal)*

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# Executive Summary

This investigation of the effects of pastoral care workers on student wellbeing in regional and metropolitan schools is part of a larger suite of research. It is the twelfth output of a partnership between Uniting Country SA (UCSA) and and the research team at the Centre for Social Impact, Flinders University. That body of work exists under the umbrella title of Hearing Country Voices, and it is an ongoing commitment to evidence informed practice which aligns with UCSA's vision of just communities where all people flourish. This project was also supported by funding from the Department for Education.

'Evidence', in the context of Hearing Country Voices, is allied to the principle of justice in UCSA's vision statement: the central value in this research is equity, and equity is about balancing the scales. It is about listening to and amplifying the voice of people and communities who are experts in their own lives, but who are often done to and seldom listened to. The contribution of our research is to ensure that people whose lives are affected by service and policy decisions, and workers who walk alongside them, have their voices and expertise articulated and elevated in the field of evidence claims behind those decisions.

Children's wellbeing is well recognised as being associated with educational attainment and long-term quality of health and life satisfaction (e.g. see AIHW 2019). Yet, Australia's record for supporting children's wellbeing is underwhelming. In South Australia, child protection notifications increased by 30% between 2013/14 and 2017/18. Australian families notified to child protection are commonly experiencing multiple and intersecting disadvantage such as domestic violence, housing stress or homelessness and mental illness (EIRD, 2019). School environments have long been recognised as having the potential to provide a buffer for children experiencing trauma and since the 1970s have provided a range of programs and services to this end. An emphasis on child wellbeing and child protection is now so embedded that it is common knowledge, for example, that school staff are trained to be mandatory reporters. Each state and territory manages student wellbeing differently, however there are also national bodies that are available to schools to support student wellbeing, such as headspace and the kids helpline (see Department for Education, 2019, Headspace 2021).

The National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP) in its current form was established in 2015, with several changes since its original inception in 2007. The NSCP is federally funded and state and territory managed (Australian Government 2012). In South Australia, the National School Chaplaincy Program is administered by the SA Department for Education with a view to enhancing student wellbeing. To date, there has been very limited evaluation of the impact of the NSCP in South Australia on student wellbeing. Further, there is little known regarding how the program may have different impacts on student outcomes in regional and metropolitan schools, or how the pastoral care program may optimise student outcomes in different demographics.

This report presents findings from the study *What are the effects of pastoral care workers on student wellbeing in regional and metropolitan schools?* This study was conducted by researchers at the University of South Australia in partnership with the SA Department for Education and Uniting Country SA. Using mixed methods, the study explored the ways in which the National School Chaplaincy Program affects student wellbeing in South Australian regional and metropolitan government schools.

## Key findings

In this report, we present a synthesis of our findings applying a *What's the Problem Represented to be?* approach, using a program logic model. We adapted this approach to interpret the ways in which the school principals and the PCWs in this study spoke about the PCW role in terms of the logic driving the program, program policy documents (as per the literature review) and what the Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (WEC) data tells us. Using this analytical approach, we have drawn conclusions from the data that will provide insights for policy and practice that will assist pastoral care workers employed through the program in regional schools to support young regional people to flourish. The questions we use, adapted from the WPR approach to form a program logic include:

1. What's the problem represented to be?
2. What remains unproblematised?
3. What's the current solution?
4. What are the activities?
5. What has been observed to work?
6. What are the anticipated outcomes?

Our findings suggest that the following approaches to the PCW role are likely to produce positive outcomes for student wellbeing:

- **Flexibility** – being able to work across the school, with individuals and groups

- **Availability** – student wellbeing needs cannot always be timetabled

- **Teamwork** – being part of the wellbeing team, complementing others' skills

- **Authenticity** – PCW using their own interests and passions as a 'hook'

- **Community-minded** – being part of, or familiar with, the school's community and/or region

- **Kindness** – students respond well to kindness, friendliness and honesty

Our findings further suggest that the following approaches to supporting student wellbeing and enhancing the PCW role in regional contexts are likely to produce positive outcomes for student wellbeing:

- **State-level** – increase student access to in-person professional support services

- **School-level** – provide flexible options e.g. 0.5FTE SSO/0.5FTE PCW position

- **Wellbeing team-level** – provide leadership support to ensure wellbeing officer/leader and PCW roles are complementary for the school context and student needs

- **Provider-level** – provide support to PCWs to foster PCW wellbeing (e.g. debriefing, burn out prevention)

- **Recruitment** – schools and providers work together to ensure PCW role contracts are appropriate for the school community context and student needs

- **Recognition** – that the PCW is trained in youth mental health and referrals.

# Recommendations

We provide recommendations for providers, school wellbeing leadership teams and the Department for Education to assist PCWs to support young people to flourish as follows:

*Providers should:*

- Prioritise recruiting PCW candidates from the local school community or region where possible and seek exemptions from requiring the minimum qualifications (i.e. Certificate IV in Youth Work, Pastoral Care, or Chaplaincy and Pastoral Care including mental health and making referrals) where the selection panel (school and provider) determine that a strong candidate exists based on equivalent skills and experience.
- Consider ways to provide training that have less impact on the PCW's central role of providing student support, for example by providing a mix of interactive online and in-person training so that PCWs are also provided with opportunities to network and share experiences, and/or by sourcing additional resources for these activities.
- Avoid including additional contractual obligations (beyond those of the NSCP agreement) that may not align with the school community and local cultural context.
- Establish and ensure PCWs are familiar with organisational support structures (including but not restricted to the organisation's Employment Assistance Program) to mitigate risks of negative mental health effects of experiencing emotional distress because of the nature of the role and the risk of burn out and vicarious trauma.
- Furnish new PCWs with a toolkit that has been developed from the findings of this report, based on the key attributes of: flexibility, availability, teamwork, authenticity, community-minded, and kindness.
- Advocate for increased PCW hours for regional schools, prioritising those schools that are: 1) furthest from in-person child and adolescent mental health services, 2) experiencing highest levels of disadvantage.

*School leadership teams should:*

- Recognise that PCWs are required to have the capacity to refer and follow up students who they identify as requiring mental health support beyond that provided by the school wellbeing team. The current structure can lead to the presumption that the wellbeing officer/leader is more highly qualified for referral than the PCW, however the wellbeing officer/leader may not possess mental health or referral training.
- Ensure that the PCW is an integral person in the wellbeing team with input into school approaches to supporting student wellbeing.
- Consider offering a part-time School Services Officer role to PCWs in such a way that this role can be flexible, so that PCWs are available to students over more of the school week.
- Consider adopting the Wellbeing Classroom Approach to support the role of the PCW and to improve whole of school student wellbeing.
- Be centrally involved in the recruitment of PCWs and where possible contribute to matching candidate skills and experience to the school community culture and that complement the existing wellbeing team.

*The Department for Education should:*

- Increase support for student wellbeing in regional schools. Online and infrequent CAMHS visits are inadequate and inappropriate for promoting and supporting student wellbeing.
- Consider additional mental health and wellbeing support for schools such as through the provision of school psychologists, and by training wellbeing leaders so that they possess youth mental health, counselling and referral expertise at least to the same level as PCWs.
- Leverage existing or provide additional resources to increase the number of PCW hours at regional schools, in particular to those that are experiencing greatest disadvantage.
- Provide leadership regarding PCW recruitment. Providers should be encouraged to develop PCW contracts that align with the NSCP agreement, match community context and focus on student wellbeing (rather than provider preference).
- Consider amending the current requirements for exemption applications for regional, rural and remote schools from requiring the minimum qualifications (i.e. Certificate IV in Youth Work, Pastoral Care, or Chaplaincy and Pastoral Care including mental health and making referrals) to reduce the required vacancy length where the selection panel (school and provider) determine that a strong candidate exists based on equivalent skills and experience.
- Facilitate the development of an evaluation framework to measure student outcomes associated with the PCW role, for example by analysing changes in student behaviour and absentee records of those students supported by/working with PCWs.

# Introduction

Children's wellbeing is well recognised as being associated with educational attainment, which in turn affects children's long-term quality of health and life satisfaction (e.g. see AIHW 2019). In the Australian context, systemic causes of poverty and their relationship to trauma and subsequent poor wellbeing is rarely addressed in policy or practice in favour of interventions that target individual parental, or potentially a little too late, child behaviour (Ainsworth and Hansen 2018, Gupta and Blumhardt 2016). Both the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020* and *the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022* emphasise the importance of prevention, for example by providing support to families at risk of child protection agency engagement. Neither of these plans have been fully funded or implemented (Irani & Roy, 2018).

Although there is evidence that school-based child wellbeing initiatives have been successful in their efforts to foster student engagement, it would be remiss not to mention at the outset that whilst such programs can support student wellbeing, they cannot – nor should they be expected to – address the causes of their students' poor wellbeing (for in-depth examples of evidence from past and current programs, see Towl and Hemphill, 2000, Slee, Skrzpiec and Cefai, 2017). Despite schools' best efforts, children who have experienced trauma have poorer outcomes as adults than their matched adult populations (Amos and Segal 2019, Goemans, van Geel, and Vedder 2018, Ainsworth and Hansen 2018).

The National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP) in its current form was established in 2015, with several changes since its original inception in 2007. The NSCP is federally funded and state and territory managed (Australian Government 2012). The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians states that, 'schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians' (MCEETYA 2008, p. 4).

The student welfare function performed in state, independent and Catholic schools enables school chaplains (pastoral care workers in South Australia) to provide support to students in ways that are consistent with the NSCP in Australian federal, state and territory governments' project agreements (Australian Government 2012, p. 11). The Project Agreement for the NSCP 2019-2022, like its predecessor, requires that chaplains not proselytise and that chaplains have a minimum qualification of a Certificate IV in Youth Work, Pastoral Care, or Chaplaincy and Pastoral Care and within that, have included mental health and making referrals units of competency (Australian Government, 2012, Commonwealth of Australia 2018). Providers can initiate an exemption process to allow a pastoral care worker to commence working in a school delivering the NSCP while they undertake the required studies to meet NSCP minimum qualifications, but only after a failed extensive recruitment process and a significant vacancy in the role (usually at least 12 months).

In South Australia, the NSCP is administered by the Department for Education with a view to enhancing student wellbeing. The Department for Education invites state, Catholic and independent schools to apply for funding to engage pastoral care workers (PCWs) in their schools. To date, there has been very limited evaluation of the NSCP regarding the impact of the program on student wellbeing outcomes. Further, there is little known regarding how the program may have different impacts on student outcomes in regional and metropolitan schools, or how the pastoral care program may optimise student outcomes in different community contexts.

The NSCP is administered in Australian states and territories within the context of larger wellbeing support systems. In some states, school psychologists, school-based mental health professionals (e.g. mental health nurses) and/or school general practitioners are employed by state education agencies to provide mental health support to government school students (Department of Education, 2018, Department of Education and Training, 2020). In South Australia, each government school has student wellbeing leaders which are teachers with an additional wellbeing component included in their role, with FTE dependent on school size and need (Department for Education, 2019). Wellbeing leaders and the PCW work together and may also refer students to other agencies. These include Headspace, the kids helpline and the state-wide Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).
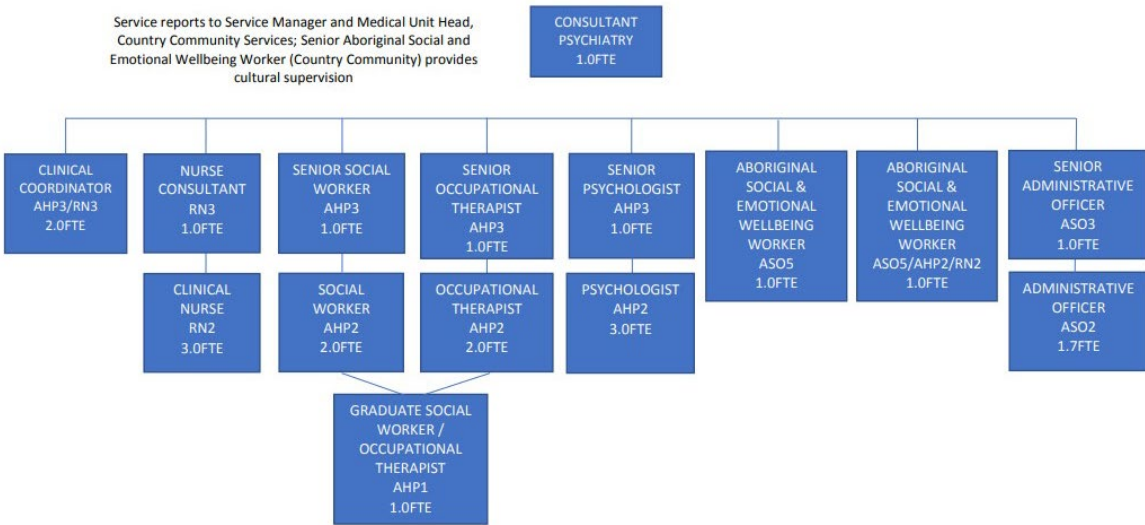


Figure 1. CAMHS Northern Country Community Structure (Port Lincoln, Whyalla, Port Augusta, Port Pirie, Yorke Peninsula, Clare Valley, Barossa Valley). Source: CAMHS 2017

Headspace is a national organisation that offers in-person and online services and with regard to the current study footprint, has centres in Port Augusta, Whyalla and Port Lincoln (Headspace 2021). The kids helpline is also a national service, providing free 24/7 online or telephone counselling (Kids Helpline, 2021). The key state-funded referral agency for student mental illness is CAMHS (see figure 1. for the CAMHS service supporting students relevant for this study).

This report is structured as follows. The literature review below starts with an outline of the few NSCP evaluations conducted in Australia, followed by an examination of the approaches taken by school chaplains, evidence of differences between school chaplaincy in metropolitan versus regional schools, and chaplaincy outcomes (student mental health and wellbeing). We then provide an outline of our study methods and present a synthesis of our findings applying a *What's the Problem Represented to be? Approach*, using a program logic model. Finally, we draw conclusions from the data that will provide insights for policy and practice that will assist pastoral care workers employed through the program in regional schools to support young regional people to flourish.

# Literature review

## PCW Providers in South Australia

There are four approved NSCP providers in South Australia: Schools Ministry Group (SMG), Centacare Catholic Family Services, Uniting Country SA (UCSA) and Your Dream. Centacare currently only services metropolitan schools, SMG services both metropolitan and regional schools, while UCSA services regional schools only (see table 1).

| PCW provider | Schools serviced | |
|---|---|---|
| | Number | Percent |
| Schools Ministry Group | 327 | 91.08 |
| Centacare | 24 | 6.69 |
| Uniting Country SA | 7 | 1.95 |
| Your Dream | 1 | 0.28 |
| Total | 359 | 100 |

Table 1. PCW Provider Statistics based on SA Department of Education PCW Provider Agreements 2019/2020. Source: South Australia Department for Education, 2021.

The Schools Ministry Group (SMG) is the largest pastoral care provider in South Australian regional and metropolitan state schools. SMG has been providing chaplaincy services to schools since 1986, pre-dating the NSCP and states in the 2018 Constitution that the 'vision and belief' is to 'enable South Australian young people and school communities the opportunity to respond positively to God, themselves and others in the light of what God has revealed in Jesus Christ' (SMG, 2018). Centacare Catholic Family Services and Uniting Country SA provide a broad range of community services (e.g. family and domestic violence, financial, housing and homelessness services and Aboriginal-specific Services) and have been providing school pastoral care services in more recent years. Centacare Catholic Family Services is the second largest metropolitan and regional school pastoral care provider in South Australia, providing support 'regardless of race, economic circumstance, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious belief or ethnic background'. Uniting Country SA (UCSA) provides pastoral care services in a small, although growing, number of regional schools in South Australia in line with its vision for: 'compassionate, respectful and strong country communities where all people flourish' (UCSA 2019). Your Dream is affiliated with Australian Christian Churches, which is 'a national association of Pentecostal churches' (ACC 2019). Your Dream has been providing school chaplains in the eastern states since 2011 and more recently in South Australia, stating in its brochure that 'all chaplains support and serve all students regardless of gender, belief, culture or background' (Your Dream, ND).

## Previous evaluations of the NSCP

Two national evaluations of the NSCP and two state-based have been undertaken since the program began in 2007. The most recent national evaluation was undertaken by Kantar (2018) and an earlier evaluation by Hughes and Sims (2009). Kantar (2018) used a similar methodology to Hughes and Sims (2009), although with much lower response rates. Both used quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews) research methods. Both samples comprised principals, chaplains, parents, and students.

The Hughes and Sims (2009) report, although older, provides the most comprehensive evaluation of the NSCP to date. The study informing the report achieved much higher response rates that the more recent Kantar (2018) study, suggesting that their findings may be more reliable (see tables 1, 2 and 4). The Hughes and Sims (2009) data and the ways in which the data were analysed are also more closely aligned to the current research objectives in terms of providing some limited information on differences between metropolitan and regional schools (see table 4).

Data were collected from principals, chaplains, other school staff, parents, and students. In total, 688 Principals and 1031 chaplains completed the questionnaire, and 190 students from 21 selected schools were interviewed and completed surveys. Ninety-eight other school staff volunteered to participate and were interviewed or completed a survey. Parental participation was also higher than in the Kantar (2018) study, with 41 parents interviewed and 8 completing a web-based survey. Key topics explored included the perceived importance of chaplaincy services in schools, student awareness of and mode of access to chaplaincy services, reasons for accessing a chaplain, issues dealt with by chaplains, contribution of chaplaincy to student wellbeing, and perceived efficacy of the chaplaincy program within a school.

| State | Number of Principals Invited to Do the Survey | Number of Responses | Response Rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| ACT | 28 | 14 | 50% |
| QLD | 632 | 213 | 34% |
| SA | 321 | 149 | 46% |
| TAS | 90 | 47 | 52% |
| VIC | 270 | 150 | 55% |
| WA | 285 | 102 | 36% |
| State not indicated | | 12 | |
| Total | 1626 | 688 | 42% |

Table 2. Source: Hughes and Sims (2009) The number of principals invited to complete the questionnaire on chaplaincy and the response rate, page 11.

| State | Number of Chaplains Invited to Do the Survey | Number of Responses | Response Rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| ACT | 28 | 16 | 57% |
| QLD | 505 | 441 | 87% |
| SA | 309 | 257 | 83% |
| TAS | 75 | 68 | 91% |
| VIC | 220 | 88 | 40% |
| WA | 259 | 151 | 58% |
| State not indicated | | 10 | |
| Total | 1396 | 1031 | 74% |

Table 3. Source: Hughes and Sims (2009) The number of chaplains invited to complete the questionnaire on chaplaincy and the response rate, page 12.

Of the 3,000 schools that participated in the NSCP in the year under evaluation (2016) for the Kantar (2018) report, only 23 parents (4 from South Australia) volunteered to participate in interviews. Only 6 percent or 134 students responded, suggesting that the recruitment methodology may have been inappropriate for its intended audience. It is also possible that students responding were predominantly those that had utilised the chaplaincy service.

| Category | Numbers of Case Studies |
|---|---|
| Primary / Secondary Schools | 11 Primary Schools, 10 Secondary Schools |
| Metropolitan / Regional / Rural Schools | 10 Metropolitan, 4 Regional City (over 20,000 population), 7 Rural. |
| School Size | 5 small (less than 250 students) 12 medium (250 to 650 students) 4 large (more than 650 students) |
| Socio-Economic Level of Area | 7 low socio-economic level (SEIFA below 900) 12 medium socio-economic level (SEIFA 900 to 1100) 2 high socio-economic level (SEIFA above 1100) |
| Levels of Multiculturalism | 4 high levels of multiculturalism 17 low levels of multiculturalism Four schools had high numbers of Indigenous students |

Table 4. Source: Hughes and Sims (2009) The range of schools in which case studies were held, page 13.

The response rates shown in Table 5 below suggest that the results should be read with caution and may indicate that the views of many individuals impacted by the NSCP (principals, chaplains, parents and students) may not be represented (non-response bias) in the results presented. Key areas the evaluation explored included the perceived importance of chaplaincy services in schools, student awareness of and mode of access to chaplaincy services, reasons for accessing a chaplain, issues dealt with by chaplains, contribution of chaplaincy to student wellbeing, and perceived efficacy of the chaplaincy program within a school (see Figure 2).

| Target Audience | Base n=2147 | Base % |
|---|---|---|
| Principals | 477 | 22% |
| Chaplains | 498 | 23% |
| Parents | 1038 | 48% |
| Students | 134 | 6% |

| School Type | Base n=2147 | Base % |
|---|---|---|
| Catholic | 142 | 7% |
| Independent | 845 | 39% |
| Government | 1160 | 54% |

| State | Base n=2147 | Base % |
|---|---|---|
| ACT | 15 | 1% |
| NSW | 640 | 30% |
| NT | 44 | 2% |
| QLD | 685 | 32% |
| SA | 272 | 13% |
| TAS | 57 | 3% |
| VIC | 168 | 8% |
| WA | 266 | 12% |

Table 5 Source: Kantar (2018) Sample composition – quantitative surveys, page 23.

Among respondents, the importance of chaplaincy services was high for all participant groups (Figure 2). It cannot be identified from the data available, however, whether the perceived importance of chaplaincy services has any relationship to whole of school versus individual approaches.
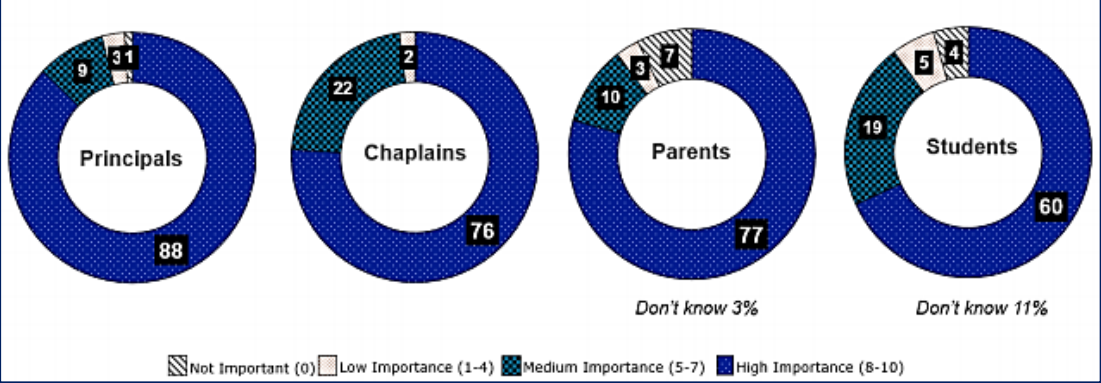


Figure 2. Source: Kantar (2018) The importance of chaplaincy services among principals, chaplains, parents and students, page 48.
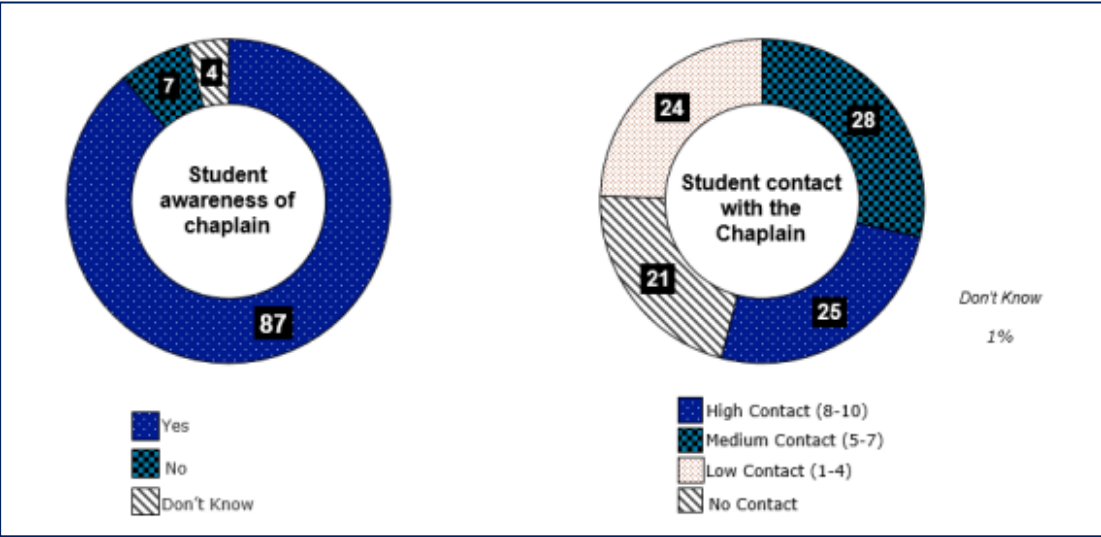


Figure 3. Source: Kantar (2018) Student awareness of and interaction with the chaplain, page 25.

It appears that the majority of the student responders to the survey had experienced high to medium contact with the chaplain (see Figure 3). Again, given the low response rate, it may be the case that many non-responders had not had contact with a school chaplain, or did not see any relevance of school chaplaincy to themselves. Whether this is reflective of a whole of school versus individual approach to school chaplaincy, cannot be seen from this data but it does indicate that student responses should not be generalised from participants to the whole student population.

A Queensland study exploring school chaplaincy was conducted by Pohlmann (2010) as part of his doctoral thesis. Pohlmann examined the nature and effectiveness of chaplaincy services in Queensland government schools. In Queensland, the school chaplaincy program is primarily managed by Scripture

Union (SU) Queensland. The research was conducted in 3 phases, these being broad data collection, survey, and follow up focus groups. Phase one data were collected from state school chaplaincy documents, archival records, results from a previous internal SU Queensland survey, followed by administering a survey and conducting interviews with a range of chaplaincy stakeholders.

Analysis of the first two phases framed 30 'issues' that formed the basis of surveys that were then conducted with school-based and non-school-based stakeholders. The stakeholders included the school community (students, staff, parents, administrators and churches), the employing authority, chaplains, and Education Queensland. Based on the responses obtained, the most problematic chaplaincy issues were further explored in focus groups with four from school-based Local Chaplaincy Committees (LCCs) of which 2 were rural and 2 urban, one government-based and one SU Queensland based. Unfortunately, the data are not presented in a way that explores any differences or similarities between regional and metropolitan sites. This is likely due to the very low survey response rates. Nevertheless, the 30 key issues identified may be useful for the interview stage of the current research. For the purposes of the current study, Pohlmann's 'issues' could be categorised into five domains outlined in Table 6 below.

| Topic | Issue (Pohlmann 2010) |
|---|---|
| School-based | How well the school community makes use of the chaplaincy service. |
| | How well the chaplain's time is used in the school. |
| | How well the school community supports the chaplaincy service. |
| | Setting goals for the chaplaincy service and achieving them. |
| | The chaplain's role as a counsellor in the school. |
| | The evaluation of the chaplaincy service by themselves or others. |
| | The ease of use of the chaplaincy service. |
| | Coordinating and/or teaching Religious Education. |
| Resource-based | Having enough resources for the chaplaincy service to operate. |
| | How finance and employment issues affect the chaplaincy service. |
| | Issues from outside the local school which impact on the chaplaincy service. e.g. government or employer issues etc. |
| School community-based | The chaplaincy service having a positive profile in the school community. |
| | How well the chaplaincy meets the needs of the school community. |
| | The chaplaincy service having a positive effect on the school community. |
| | What the school community expects from the chaplaincy service. |
| | How well the school community communicates about the chaplaincy service. |
| | The attitudes of the school community towards the chaplaincy service. |
| | How suitable the chaplain's role is in the school community. |
| Religion and religious organisation based | The motives of the chaplaincy service. |
| | The history of the chaplaincy service. |
| | The place of Christian spirituality within the chaplaincy service. |
| Chaplain training and attributes | Initial training and continuing professional development for the chaplain. |
| | The chaplain's personality. |
| | How well the chaplain works with others inside and outside the school. |
| | The chaplain being fully involved in the life of the school community. |
| | The health and wellbeing of the chaplain. |
| | How well the chaplain connects with the school community. |
| | The amount of care and concern shown by the chaplain towards people in the school community. |
| | The attitude of the chaplain to their job. |
| | The specific abilities and skills of the chaplain. |

Table 6. Five domains of school chaplaincy distilled from the 30 issues identified by Pohlmann (2010)

The fourth study that has explored chaplaincy programs was conducted in Tasmania by Rayner and Swabey (2016). Rayner and Swabey conducted an online survey to which 68 chaplains located in

Tasmanian government schools responded, sharing their views on their work. In that study, most of the chaplains (59%) were working in primary schools, and just under half (47%) were in rural areas.

Nearly one in five participating chaplains (19%) had been working in the same school for over 6 years. Half (50%) of the participating chaplains reported interacting with over 50 students per day, on average, and just over one third (31%) reported interacting with an average of over 100 students per day. Chaplains reported providing students with support in relation to behaviour management, peer relations and loneliness, and sense of purpose/self-esteem most days of the school year. In contrast, the chaplains in that study reported providing support to students with issues associated with alcohol and drug use as well as self-harm once per year.

Responses from participating chaplains indicated they were generally confident regarding their effectiveness in relation to providing students with an opportunity to talk through issues, contributing to the morale of the school community, and building social inclusion and community in the school. A third of chaplains reported engaging in regular and/or close interaction with other school staff, while two-thirds reported having daily and/or essential working interaction. More than half (58%) of participating chaplains reported facilitating a breakfast club. Nearly half of the chaplains (47%) reported connecting their schools with between 3 and 5 community groups such as local churches, charities, sporting clubs and support services. Most chaplains reported that their work was unique in the school, particularly being there to listen. Just over one quarter (26%) of the participating chaplains reported that their previous studies/qualification prepared them extremely well for their role in the school.

Overall, there is very limited literature available on the efficacy of school chaplaincy and even less literature is available that provides information about metropolitan versus regional schools. What follows is a thematic synthesis of the literature found, in accordance with the research themes of 'approaches to school chaplaincy', 'metropolitan versus rural', and 'chaplaincy outcomes – mental health and wellbeing'.

## Approaches to School Chaplaincy

Much of the literature available in the area of school chaplaincy debates whether school chaplaincy should be present in government schools rather than evaluate its efficacy as a student welfare measure. Literature that directly addresses approaches to the implementation of school chaplaincy is limited. Nevertheless, some information can be gained from the Hughes and Sims (2009) evaluation. In terms of approaches to chaplaincy, Hughes and Sims (2009) notes that the results of their 21 case studies of schools suggests that there are 3 emphases in the way chaplaincy is being conducted, although no one emphasis occurred to the exclusion of the other. These 3 emphases are listed as follows:

> *1. Pastoral Care of individuals* emphasis, focussing on talking with individuals in either informal or structured ways;
> *2. Pastoral Care of groups* emphasis, focussing on group activities such as sport, music, gardening, hobbies, or discussion groups; (in some cases this moved towards a 'Community Development' model); and,
> *3. Educational* emphasis, focussing on educating students, often through group activities, about relationships, behaviour management, interpersonal values, and social justice (Hughes and Sims 2009, p. 19).

The greatest proportion of chaplains' time (close to 30%) was spent in the pastoral care of individual students and usually in an informal setting such as talking to them in the playground (Hughes 2010, see Figure 4). They note that 80% of chaplains reported running classroom activities and needs-based

groups, for example, groups for dealing with grief or behaviour management occupied on average 19% of their time. This is consistent with Rayner and Swabey's (2016) Tasmanian study described above, in which chaplains reported providing a broad range of types of support, from informal individual support, through to operating a breakfast club and connecting their schools with community groups and support services.
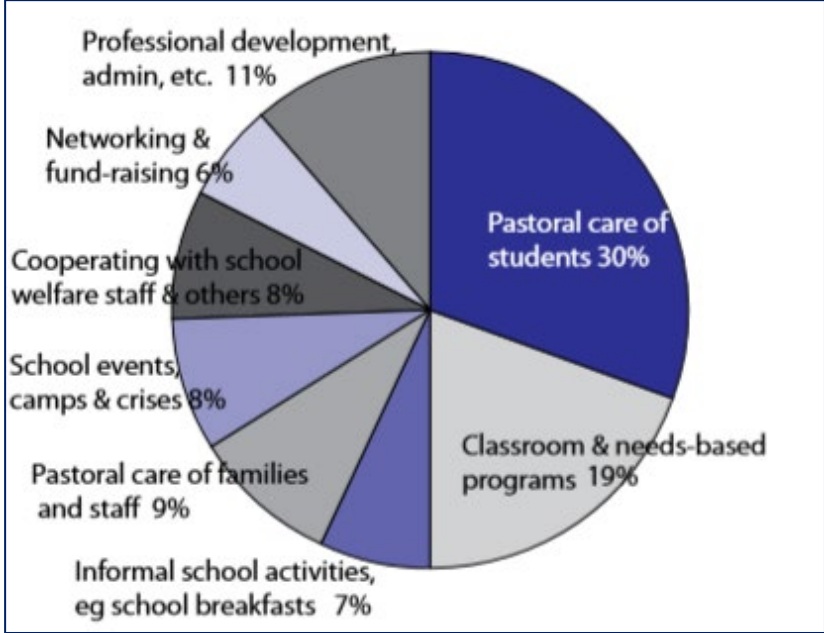


Figure 4. Source: Hughes (2010) How chaplains in government schools spend their time, page 1.

Hughes (2010) followed up the Hughes and Sims (2009) evaluation with a condensed focus on the role of chaplains, drawing on the original data. Hughes and Sims (2009) analysis also suggests that school chaplains tend to engage in both one-on-one and whole of school activities, but it is also likely that the balance of these varied from school to school and this may have impacts on the overall efficacy of school chaplaincy (see Table 7).

| Activity | Not at all (%) | Once or twice (%) | Several or many times (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Off-site visits to parents /care-givers | 21.5 | 28.9 | 49.6 |
| Provide needs-based groups | 17.6 | 20.9 | 61.5 |
| Led in school events or special ceremonies | 26.7 | 34.5 | 38.7 |
| Participated in school camps | 39.6 | 34.4 | 15.0 |
| Fund-raising activities | 29.2 | 36.7 | 34.1 |
| Representing chaplaincy or school in community events | 17.7 | 36.6 | 45.8 |

Table 7. Source: Hughes and Sims (2009) Activities taken in the past year by chaplains, page 18.

Patrick's (2014) study explored how the religious function of a chaplain has been recast by the NSCP in a secular form by collapsing the distinction between chaplains and student welfare workers. The author observed that under the rules of the NSCP, that the 'vast majority of school chaplains spent the vast majority of their time taking part in purely secular activities the likes of which could have (presumably) been done just as well by a youth worker or guidance counsellor' (Patrick 2014 p. 198). Wright (2009) explores the idea of chaplaincy within the context of public secular education and how the secular

context impacts on the way chaplaincy is implemented, and the distinctive role played by chaplains in contrast to other welfare-related workers.

In terms of approaches to school chaplaincy, Cross, Lester and Barnes (2017, 2014) provide insights regarding successful models and delivery of pastoral care that may also be useful for application in NSCP school chaplaincy approaches. While they do not address school chaplaincy, the authors focus on pastoral care and address how pastoral practice can best contribute to students' health and wellbeing. The authors identify four core outcomes of pastoral care, these being: promoting health and wellbeing; building resilience; enhancing academic care, and building human and social capital. They also suggest some next steps in pastoral care: building relationships and sense of belonging and enhancing help seeking and provision. Their model for effective practice in schools (Figure 5) may be useful to consider in relation to the chaplaincy practices undertaken by PCWs in the current study.
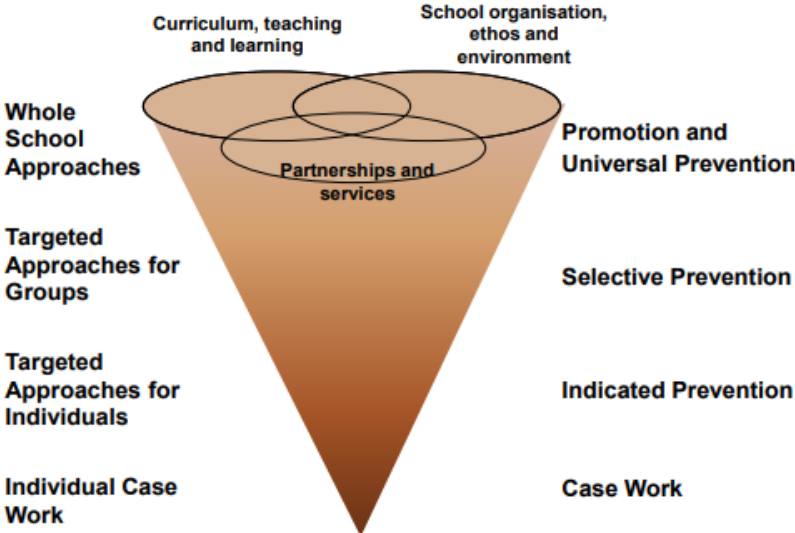


Figure 5. Source: Cross, Lester and Barnes (2017) Model for effective practice in schools, Pathways to health and well-being in schools. p.4.

In an earlier study, Cross, Lester and Barnes (2014) identified 5 main tasks for pastoral care, which could be considered along with their model (Figure 5). Their 5 main task areas include: proactive preventative pastoral care; developmental pastoral curricula; the promotion and maintenance of an orderly and supportive/collaborative environment; reactive pastoral casework; and, the management and administration of pastoral care (Cross, Lester and Barnes 2014, p. 48). Again, their findings could be useful for school chaplaincy programs and implementation.

An older, although potentially useful Western Australian study undertaken by Hearn, Campbell-Pope, House and Cross (2006) provides insights regarding pastoral care that could also be applied to the delivery of school chaplaincy. That study contributes useful information about the history and context of pastoral care in Australia and so provides valuable context for the role of school chaplains and chaplaincy services in schools. Figure 6 (Hearn et al. 2006) shows potential areas of application for pastoral care which could also capture services performed through school chaplaincy. Given recent findings from WEC data regarding the impacts on wellbeing of bullying and the most recent focus of the NSCP on cyber-bullying, revisiting the Hearn et al (2006) *Areas of Scope* could be useful for the current study (see Figure. 6).

CASEWORK

Counselling/counsellors
  Counselling skills
Peer-support
Parental illness
Bereavement
Examinations
Sexual abuse

BULLYING

Measuring
Forms of bullying
  Verbal
  Physical
  Social (exclusion)
  Sexual
Sexual orientation
Teachers as bullies
Teachers as victims
Parental attitudes
Bullies' self-concepts
Responses to bullying

CONTROL/DISCIPLINE

Rewards and punishments
Referral
Suspension and exclusion
Community projects

CLIENT VIEWS

Schooling generally
Pastoral roles/systems
Bullying
Transfer
Stress and anxiety
Assemblies
Religious education
Spiritual and moral development

PASTORAL CURRICULUM
(preventive and developmental)

Planning, implementing and
evaluating programs
  PSH/ME
  Tutorial programs
  Social skills training
  Transferable skills
  Education for parenthood
  Citizenship education
  Careers/vocational education
  Religious education
  Sex education
  Health education
  Drugs education
  Death education
  Cross-curricular V specialist
  Whole-school policies
Pedagogy
  Writing
  Human relations training
  Circle time
  Teaching thinking skills
  Meditation
Pastoral/academic links
  Study skills
Assessment

WELFARE NETWORK

Social services
LEA processes
Outreach projects
Police
Home-school links

PASTORAL MANAGEMENT

Roles
  Form tutor
  Year/house head/coordinator
Systems/structures
Pastoral/academic 'split'
Training and support
  Initial
  In-service

Figure 6. Source: Hearn et al. (2006), Scope of Areas involved in pastoral care, page 8

More recently, and pertinent to our study, McInnes and colleagues have explored the effects of trauma informed pedagogy on year 2-3 student wellbeing (2014) and as a whole school approach, the Wellbeing Classroom Approach (2020) in one South Australian school over a four year period. The Wellbeing Classroom Approach starts with the premise that children develop social skills in social rather than individual contexts and thus endeavours:

> to create a safe classroom environment, rather than an individualised response such as removing children from their class who were struggling, in an attempt to 'fix' their behaviour (McInnes et al. 2020, p. 6).

The Wellbeing Classroom Approach involved several elements, including: leadership to ensure that the approach was implemented across the school; trauma training for all teachers; the school's wellbeing leader and pastoral care worker providing up-to-date wellbeing information, and; Student Wellbeing Agents – ensuring a student voice in wellbeing activities. The study found that the whole school approach taken by the school contributed to positive changes in school culture, as well as individual student outcomes. Outcomes included a 14% reduction in reported bullying, a 48% reduction in student self-reported bullying, a small increase in school attendance and improved NAPLAN scores. These findings informed our study's questions regarding different approaches to PCW work.

## Metropolitan versus regional contexts

Literature comparing metropolitan and regional approaches and outcomes for school chaplaincy is extremely limited and this is a significant gap in the current research literature. Two of the principal literature sources found, Hughes and Sims (2009) and Pohlmann (2010), included metropolitan/rural splits in their samples but neither engaged in any comprehensive reporting of results by these two demographic categories. Pohlmann (2010) reported very low response rates which likely made reporting sub-categories unviable, but a small amount of information was reported by Hughes and Sims (2009).

Hughes and Sims (2009) stated that chaplains reported involvement in approximately 26 hours per week of activities related to chaplaincy and 26% of chaplains worked in more than 1 school. The 26 hours included personal time that was spent in professional development, extra-curricular school activities such as school camps, and some voluntary activities associated with chaplaincy. Chaplains living in the same community as their schools '(most often in rural areas) also spent some of their time informally building links with students, families and staff who lived locally'. (Hughes and Sims, 2009, p. 16). It appeared from their data (Tables 6 and 7) that the types of chaplaincy services needed can vary from school to school, depending on individual school demographics and resources. The authors observed that the challenges facing students in 'a declining rural community and those facing students in a middle-class suburb in a capital city are, in some respects, very different' (Hughes and Sims 2009, p. 22). Further, for chaplains working in rural areas, the authors noted that 'access to a school psychologist or counsellor was available in a very limited way' (Hughes and Sims 2009, p. 46), which may impact on the functions performed by the chaplain. No differences in the level of satisfaction with chaplaincy services were reported by principals in rural versus metropolitan locations.

## Chaplaincy outcomes – Mental health and wellbeing

One of the main chaplaincy outcomes of interest for this current research is mental health and wellbeing. Two useful peer-reviewed studies have explored the concept of wellbeing in schools in the context of school chaplaincy/pastoral care and public policy: Powell and Graham (2017) and Powell, Graham, Fitzgerald, Thomas and White (2018). Powell and Graham (2017) focus on student wellbeing and how it is understood by both policy documents and within school contexts. The authors explored the ways in which national concern regarding the social and emotional wellbeing of children and youth is being translated into policy and practice. They found that that the responsibility for child wellbeing is being shifted from governments to schools, alongside academic achievement, equity, citizenship, economic prosperity and social cohesion. Based on policy analysis, the authors found that while there was no education policy or related documentation that specifically focussed on wellbeing at a national level, four documents had emphasised the key role assigned to schools in promoting and supporting student wellbeing, including the NSCP for promoting spiritual, social and emotional welfare (Powell and Graham 2017).

Student wellbeing has received increasing attention over the past decade, although less attention has been paid to the contribution of the NSCP. Powell et al. (2018) conducted a national research project aimed at understanding and improving approaches to wellbeing in Catholic schools. Data were collected through 67 focus groups, involving 606 primary and secondary school students, across three Catholic school regions in different Australian states. The authors explored student views on the meaning of 'wellbeing'. Students identified relationships with self, teachers, friends, peers and significant others, as central to their wellbeing. These findings support the ways in which the WEC explores students' perspectives of their relationships at school in the context of student wellbeing.

The literature explored in this review suggests that mental health/wellbeing is a primary outcome objective for school chaplaincy programs (e.g. Pohlmann 2010). School chaplains can contribute to the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing in school communities through providing services that focus on 'accessible wellbeing promotion, prevention and early intervention (PPEI) activities, complementing other services designed more for reactive and long-term wellbeing intervention activities' (Scripture Union Queensland 2019, p. 1).
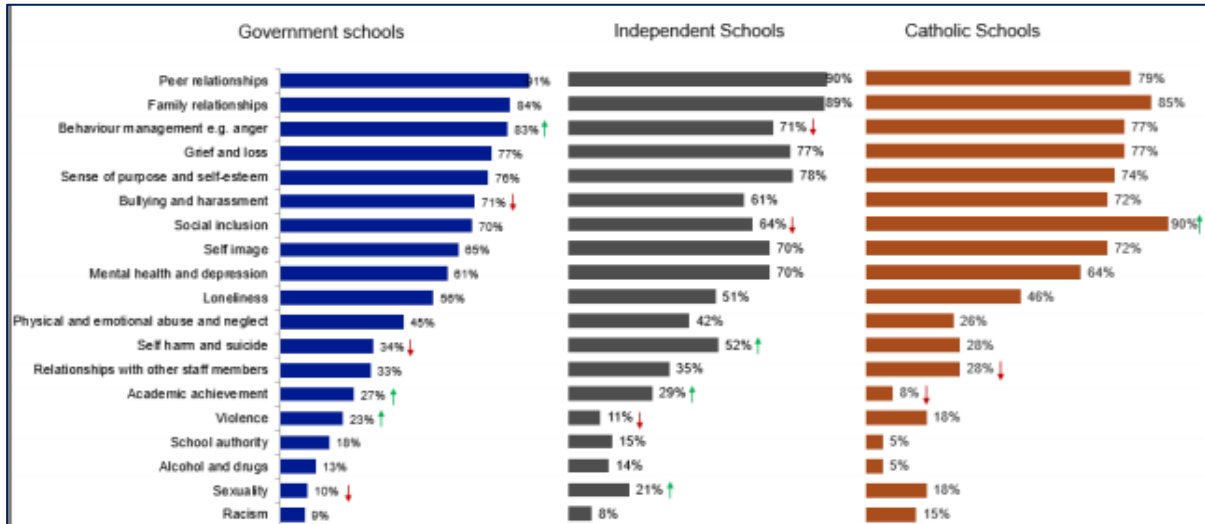


Figure 7. Source: Kantar (2018), Main issues faced by chaplains in government, independent and Catholic schools, page 50.

Anecdotal accounts of the impact on student wellbeing of school chaplains can be found in the grey literature, for example KorusConnect (2019). That short report of anecdotal accounts describes how school chaplaincy has impacted on student lives. The 'stories of impact' included: 'time to listen'; 'overcoming absenteeism'; 'a safe person'; 'making learning a priority'; 'helping with life's changes', and 'partnering for communities'.
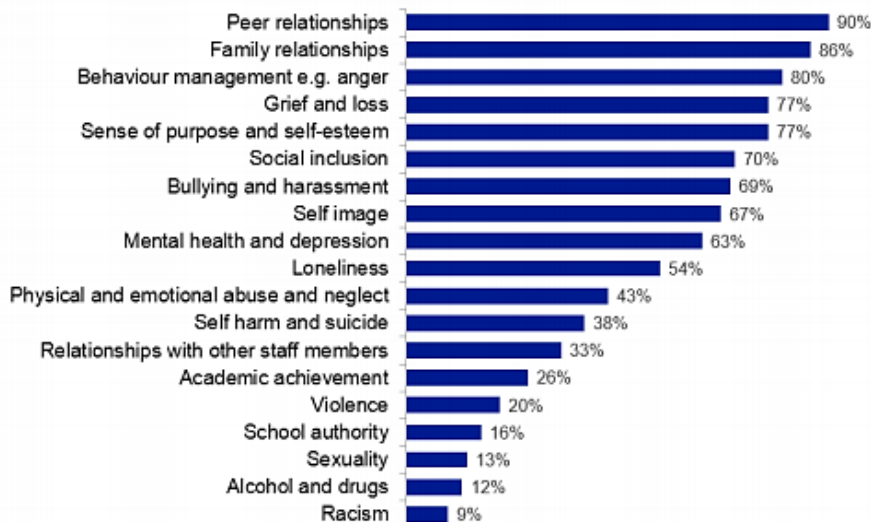


Figure 8. Source: Kantar (2018) The main issues faced by chaplains at the school, page 49.

The Kantar (2018) evaluation provides some information on the perceived effectiveness of school chaplaincy in dealing with various issues. Most of the categories fall within the mental health/wellbeing sphere. School chaplaincy was reported as being extremely effective for many of these mental health/wellness categories. Responses from chaplains represented in Kantar (2018) report indicate that

the main reason students (in the view of the responding chaplains) accessed the school chaplain, was mental health/wellbeing related, however it should be noted that these were closed questions and there was no 'other' category. Further, the data do not provide a metropolitan/rural split, so it cannot be assessed whether regions differ in the issues faced by chaplains/experienced by students (see figure 7). Nevertheless, put alongside the data provided by the earlier Hughes and Sims (2009) report, this suggests that mental health/wellbeing issues are an ongoing concern for children and youth in schools (see table 8).

| Issue | Chaplains Indicating 'Not at all' (%) | Chaplains Indicating 'Occasionally' (%) | Chaplains Indicating 'Several or Many Times' (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Behaviour management including anger | 5.1 | 25.6 | 69.3 |
| Peer relationships and loneliness | 8.2 | 28.2 | 63.7 |
| Bullying and harassment | 7.4 | 28.9 | 63.7 |
| Family relationships | 8.9 | 32.7 | 58.5 |
| Sense of purpose and self-esteem | 14.9 | 39.8 | 45.4 |
| Self concept and image | 17.6 | 38.0 | 44.4 |
| Academic and personal achievement | 13.4 | 42.9 | 43.8 |
| Grief and loss | 19.3 | 44.7 | 35.9 |
| Community involvement and social inclusion | 22.7 | 44.2 | 33.1 |
| Mental health and depression | 27.9 | 46.0 | 26.2 |
| Spirituality / big picture issues | 24.7 | 50.1 | 25.7 |
| Developmental issues | 28.9 | 46.3 | 24.8 |
| Violence | 36.8 | 41.0 | 22.2 |
| School authority | 38.9 | 39.2 | 22.0 |
| Alcohol and drug use | 50.0 | 30.8 | 19.2 |
| Physical and emotional abuse and neglect | 34.2 | 43.2 | 18.5 |
| Self harm and suicide | 55.7 | 32.7 | 11.7 |
| Sexuality | 59.8 | 29.3 | 10.8 |
| Racism | 69.6 | 25.0 | 5.4 |
| Legal issues | 61.2 | 34.0 | 4.8 |

Table 8. Source: Hughes and Sims (2009) the frequency with which chaplains have dealt with various issues in the two weeks prior to completing the questionnaire, page 59.

The results above are also consistent with the Tasmanian study conducted by Rayner and Swabey (2016). In that study, as mentioned above, chaplains reported providing students with support in relation to behaviour management, peer relations and loneliness, and sense of purpose/self-esteem most days of the school year. In contrast, they reported providing support to students with issues associated with alcohol and drug use as well as self-harm once per year.

Results from the Kantar (2018) study indicate that students tend to self-initiate contact with the school chaplain when they need help. However, to reiterate, only 23% of chaplains responded and therefore 77% are not represented in the data contributing to the figure above (Figure 8). Based on the 498 (23%) of chaplains that responded to the survey, 92% of students that had contacted a chaplain have sometimes (43%) or almost always (49%) been the initiators of their contact with the chaplain. It appears from the different proportions reported in Hughes and Sims (2009) however, that the types of

chaplaincy services needed and therefore approach required, varies from school to school (see tables 7, 8, 9).

| Group of Students | Not Involved (%) | Once or Twice Involved (%) | Often Involved (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Students of lower than average ability | 10.4 | 39.6 | 50.0 |
| Students facing mental health problems | 27.5 | 44.7 | 27.8 |
| Students differently abled | 35.4 | 37.0 | 27.6 |
| Indigenous students | 41.0 | 32.0 | 27.0 |
| Students facing physical health problems | 41.2 | 42.4 | 16.4 |
| Refugees | 77.3 | 13.5 | 9.2 |
| Students involved with juvenile justice system | 83.7 | 14.0 | 2.3 |

Table 9. Source: Hughes and Sims (2009) Involvement of chaplains with 'at risk' students, page 22.

This student initiation of contact with the school chaplain may have consequences for students, because the two strongest reasons indicated by the 138 responding students (Figure 8 above) as positive for having a school chaplain were 'someone to talk to (if struggling with something or someone)' (24% of student responders) and 'help me with problems' (22% of student responders) (note answers can overlap), possibly suggesting that those students accessing the school chaplain are seeking help for their mental wellbeing (see Figure 9).

**Good things about having a Chaplain at your school**

| | |
|---|---|
| Someone to talk to (if struggling with something or someone) | 24% |
| Help me with problems | 22% |
| Helps us figure things out/guidance/helps us understand | 13% |
| Teaches the word of God/encourage us in our faith | 13% |
| Someone you can trust/someone other than a teacher/parent | 11% |
| Always available/always there/there when we need them | 10% |
| A happy face around the yard/nice and friendly | 7% |
| Organises activities | 7% |
| Are caring and compassionate | 6% |
| Approachable/easy to talk to/comfortable | 5% |
| Supports students when they feel anxious/upset | 5% |

Figure 9. Source: Kantar (2018) Student perceptions of the advantages of having a chaplain, page 36.

The role of school chaplain in providing a non-judgemental listener that is someone to talk to, appears to be a key mechanism in promoting student wellbeing that is recognised by students, principals, and chaplains, over an extended period, indicated in Figure 9 and Table 10 (Hughes and Sims 2009, Kantar 2018). These results are also consistent with the findings of a small qualitative study conducted by Isaacs and Mergler (2017). This study explored the values of 8 school chaplains working in state schools using responses to images shown at interview. Their results suggested that core values for the eight participating chaplains were understanding, tolerance, inclusion, care, compassion, honesty, trustworthiness and integrity.

| Category of Response | Percentage of Principals Mentioning This | Percentage of Chaplains Mentioning This |
|---|---|---|
| Provision of pastoral care through non-judgemental listening | 42 | 55 |
| Modelling and teaching moral values | 10 | 23 |
| Creating and nurturing ties with the community | 9 | 18 |
| Relationship building | 8 | 27 |
| Crisis and trauma management | 6 | 21 |
| Contributing to the team of staff | 5 | 16 |
| Resolving home and parenting issues | 4 | 1 |
| Providing Christian and/or spiritual counsel | 2 | 1 |

Table 10. Source: Hughes and Sims (2009) Chaplains' most important contributions as categorised from responses to open-ended questions in surveys of principals and chaplains, page 27.

To summarise, there is very limited evidence about the effectiveness of the NSCP, constituting a considerable knowledge gap that warrants further research. There have been very few evaluations of the NSCP and those evaluations that have been conducted, have not explored the wellbeing of students. Nevertheless, the role of school chaplain in providing a non-judgemental listener that is someone to talk to is recognised by students, principals, parents and chaplains. While some studies have explored chaplains' time use (i.e. time spent in whole-of-school versus with individual students) there have been no studies that have explored the effectiveness of different approaches.

The studies reviewed above suggest that there may be differences in PCW practices between schools, depending on individual school demographics and resources. Moreover, there is limited evidence that differences may be especially notable between regional and metropolitan schools. Literature comparing metropolitan and regional approaches and outcomes for school chaplaincy is extremely limited and this is a significant gap in the current research literature.

The findings from this literature review indicate that the *What are the effects of pastoral care workers on student wellbeing in regional and metropolitan schools?* study is timely and will address some significant knowledge gaps. The findings from the review will be used to inform the study, which will provide insights for policy and practice that will assist pastoral care workers employed through the program in regional schools to support young regional people to flourish.

The literature review outlined above informs the study: 'What are the effects of pastoral care workers on student wellbeing in regional and metropolitan schools?' The study aims to meet the following **research questions:**

1. In what ways does the South Australian NSCP impact on student wellbeing outcomes in regional and metropolitan schools?
   a. Does the presence of a pastoral care worker in a school impact on student wellbeing?
   b. Does the presence of a pastoral care worker impact on student wellbeing in different ways in regional schools when compared with metropolitan schools?
2. What approaches do pastoral care workers take in their schools (i.e. whole school/individual student) and what are the student outcomes of different approaches?
3. What will assist pastoral care workers in regional schools to support young regional people to flourish?

# Methods

To answer our research questions, we undertook a mixed methods approach. Using mixed methods is a useful way to ensure triangulation of findings, which essentially means 'to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: p5). We established a project team comprising UCSA staff, Department for Education staff and TAASE researchers to co-design and guide the project, including the development of research questions, participant recruitment and interpretation of findings.

We analysed secondary survey data from the WEC to answer research question 1. The Wellbeing and Engagement Collection is a South Australian Department for Education survey that is conducted annually with students from year 4 at participating schools to increase understanding of student wellbeing and school engagement from students' perspectives. The purpose of the survey is to inform schools, communities and government 'what needs to occur to ensure students experience success and are provided with resources and opportunities to reach their full potential' (Department for Education 2020).

To answer question 2, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 6 regional school principals with pastoral care workers and 5 regional pastoral care workers in the UCSA footprint to explore their views on what works at their sites (e.g. one-to-one or whole school approaches). We undertook interviews face-to-face at the schools where principals and PCWs were employed, except for 2 interviews which we conducted via Zoom because the participants were unable to attend in person. Interviews ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes. We digitally recorded and transcribed interviews using NVivo digital transcription and obtained consent at the time of interviews.

We answered question 3 by synthesising the findings from the quantitative and qualitative data. We obtained ethics approval from an NHMRC approved human research ethics committee before undertaking the research.

## Sample selection

This research was initiated UCSA to explore the impacts of their program on student wellbeing in regional schools, compared to the wellbeing of students in regional schools without PCWs and the impacts on student wellbeing in metropolitan schools with PCWs. Therefore, the five schools to which UCSA was contracted for the provision of PCWs in the five years preceding this study formed the foundation of the sample.

| Regional PCW (UCSA) | ICSEA | Metro PCW | ICSEA | Regional Non-PCW | ICSEA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| School 1 (Primary) | 840 | School 1 (Primary) | 939 | School 1 (Area) | 806 |
| School 2 (Area) | 934 | School 2 (Secondary) | 975 | School 2 (Area) | 998 |
| School 3 (JP & Primary) | 988, 942 | School 3 (R – 12) | 1026 | School 1 (Primary) | 916 |
| School 4 (Area) | 936 | School 4 (Primary) | 970 | School 4 (Primary) | 899 |
| School 5 (Area) | 999 | School 5 (Secondary) | 961 | School 5 (Area) | 1000 |
| | | | | School 6 (Primary) | 962 |

Table 11. Sample selection using ICSEA

To answer our research questions, we matched regional schools without PCW contracts and metropolitan and regional schools with PCW contracts with other providers to the original sample. Matching inclusion criteria included similar geographic location, school Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value, proportion of Indigenous students and non-English speaking background students, type of school (Primary, Secondary, Area, R-12), and enrolment numbers, as per

the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) 'My School' website (ACARA 2020). We excluded schools that did not have wellbeing and engagement collection (WEC) data available for 2015, 2017 and 2019. Participation in the WEC is voluntary for schools and for students within participating schools. The majority of South Australian state schools has PCW contracts and therefore identifying suitable control schools that were non-PCW and had WEC data available proved particularly challenging (see table 11 for the de-identified sample). We recruited school principal interview participants from the regional schools with PCWs and PCWs employed by UCSA.

## Quantitative methods

We developed a set of questions and hypotheses based on our main research questions and the findings from our literature review as follows.

*WEC data questions:*
1. Does the presence of a pastoral care worker in a school impact on student wellbeing?
2. Does the presence of a pastoral care worker impact on student wellbeing in different ways in regional schools when compared with metropolitan schools?

*WEC data hypotheses:*
- H1. The presence of a pastoral care worker in a school impacts positively on the sub-domains as outlined in table 12 (Appendix B).
- H0. The presence of a pastoral care worker in a school has no impact on the sub-domains as outlined in table 12 (Appendix B).
- H2. The presence of a pastoral care worker in a regional school has different impacts on student wellbeing than it does in matched metropolitan schools as outlined in table 12 (Appendix B).
- H3. The presence of a pastoral care worker in any given school has different impacts on student wellbeing from those of other schools with a pastoral care worker as outlined in table 12 (Appendix B).

WEC variables had been pre-coded by the Department for Education to 'Yes' or 'No', or recoded to 'High Wellbeing', 'Medium Wellbeing' and 'Low Wellbeing'. The project team discussed options and decided to use these derived variables to maintain consistency with the department's own analysis variables.

We analysed the data from the 2015, 2017 and 2019 surveys enabling the potential impact on student wellbeing of 5 years of PCW involvement to be examined. Changes in the WEC responses over time can be due to many factors that exist independently of PCW activities. We grouped student responses into three school year levels for analysis; Years 4 to 6, Years 7 to 9, and Years 10 to 12, which served to increase the number of observations available in each analysis group.

Using the derived variables, the proportion of each WEC response category within a question was calculated within each School Year Level of 4 to 6, 7 to 9, 10 to 12, and 4 to 12 (Total), for the years 2015, 2017 and 2019 (10 to 12, 2019 only). These proportions were grouped into categories of Metro PCW, Regional PCW and Regional Non PCW, based on the school which the student attended when they completed the WEC form. The average was calculated for each category for each School Year Level for each calendar year (2015, 2017, 2019) along with its standard deviation using the AVERAGE and STANDARD DEVIATION functions in Excel. Each school contributed equally to its analysis group so that schools with large respondent numbers could not dominate the average calculated. Denominators for the averages were adjusted to take account of empty cells caused by there being no respondents in the Year Level group for the selected school(s).

Effect size was calculated in Excel using the Hedges g correction formula for small sample sizes, and the 95 percent confidence interval was calculated for the effect size using the CONFIDENCE function in Excel. The probability of the T statistic was calculated using the T.TEST function in Excel which returns the probability of T for a given pair of data arrays. While the use of a T.Test would usually assume a random selection, in this instance, random selection could not be assumed as participation in the WEC is voluntary both by the student and the school, and the selection of schools was a purposive sample. Therefore, effect size was calculated first and the results of the T.Test function aligned with effect sizes of over 0.8 which are large effect sizes. As there was good alignment with large effect sizes and their confidence intervals, the output of the T.Test function was used in the analysis to identify which effects were likely statistically significant. However, the results presented in this report are statistically significant only in the context of the schools selected for inclusion and should not be used to form broad conclusions about the efficacy of other PCW providers or the overall efficacy of PCWs in schools.

The WEC data findings need to be read with caution for a range of reasons. Firstly, there are few schools in South Australia without contracts with PCW providers to enable closely aligned matches against the selected study schools (i.e. those that can be matched against the selected PCW schools over the past 5 years) and that have completed WEC surveys in the selected years. Secondly, while 1252 respondent records made up the full sample used, the sample sizes were small for each Year Level group, time frame, and category examined. Thirdly, the WEC is a voluntary survey and therefore volunteer bias may be present. Lastly, given the changing demographics of the schools included in the study, there are many potentially confounding factors in children's lives that may influence their wellbeing and engagement to a greater extent than that which could be expected from the presence of a PCW at their school for as little as 10 hours per week.

### Qualitative analysis

We analysed qualitative data using the Framework method (Ritchie et al., 2003). Framework entails a process of familiarisation, developing a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation. It offers a useful way to systematically manage and interpret qualitative data, particularly for applied policy research. We developed a coding framework based on the research questions and emergent themes. We coded interview data using NVivo 12 Plus, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program.

### Synthesis

We then applied Bacchi's (1999, 2012) 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' approach to policy analysis to interpret the data together and develop a program logic. Our data synthesis interprets and documents the implementation, operation and outcomes against the stated goals and objectives of the program.

# Findings

In this section, we present a summary of the quantitative results, followed by the qualitative findings. We then present a synthesis of our findings applying a What's the Problem Represented to be? Approach, using a program logic model in the discussion section. We have only included WEC data analysis where differences and changes are statistically significant and follow up some of these with qualitative data where these may provide further insights or explanations. The WEC data suggest that student wellbeing is declining overall across South Australian government schools and the interview data provides potential explanations as to why this is occurring in regional schools.

School principals described witnessing their schools descending from higher to lower categories (i.e. index of disadvantage) and feeling overwhelmed trying to keep up with student wellbeing needs. Principals and PCWs expressed deep concerns for their students, particularly regarding the abject and worsening deprivation and trauma that is part of too many children's daily lives. Our findings suggest that PCWs are providing an equalising effect on student wellbeing (basically by providing some tools for students to navigate their responses to trauma) but far more support is required to produce positive change in student wellbeing - much of which is beyond the remit of the education sector. Nevertheless, our findings provide insights regarding ways that the conduct of the NSCP and student wellbeing policy and practice in South Australia may be enhanced to provide greater support for students.

## Summary of significant quantitative findings

The findings suggests that there is a decline in student wellbeing over time – as students move up through year levels – across all three categories examined. Within year level groups, there were some significant differences between categories which may or may not be influenced by the presence of a PCW in the selected schools.

### Year Level 4 to 6

Variables that show differences between Metro PCW and Regional PCW in 2019 are music and arts (unlikely to be PCW given PCW scope of practise), physical bullying, friendship, overall health, and optimism. Variables that show differences between Regional PCW and Regional Non PCW in 2019 are school climate, happiness, and perseverance.

Of note is that between 2017 and 2019, a fall in all three categories (including Regional Non PCW) is evident for low perseverance, suggesting that perseverance may be increasing. That the falls have occurred in all three categories, may suggest that this change in the variable value may not be PCW related and may be due to state-wide curriculum interventions.

### Year level 7 to 9

For the Year Level 7 to 9, variables that show differences between Metro PCW and Regional PCW in 2019 are optimism, cyber bullying, happiness, friendship, and overall health. The variables that show a significant difference between Regional PCW and Regional Non PCW in 2019 is overall health. A decline in the prevalence of high peer belonging appears to be present in Metro PCW, Regional PCW and Regional Non PCW for the Year Level 7 to 9, again suggesting that this is a phenomenon outside the effects of PCWs.

### Year Level 10 to 12

For the Year Level 10 to 12, variables that show differences between Metro PCW and Regional PCW in 2019 are optimism, connectedness to school, and social bullying. The variables that show a significant difference between Regional PCW and Regional Non PCW in 2019 are friendship, verbal bullying, and perseverance.

### Year Level 4 to 12

For the combined Year Level 4 to 12, the variable that shows a significant difference between Metro PCW and Regional PCW in 2019 is cyber bullying.

## Hypotheses

To guide our quantitative data analysis, we originally developed a series of data hypotheses around the WEC survey variables (see Appendix B).

**H₁**. *The presence of a pastoral care worker in a school impacts positively on the sub-domains as outlined in table 3.*

**H₀**. *The presence of a pastoral care worker in a school has no impact on the sub-domains as outlined in table 3.*

**H₂**. *The presence of a pastoral care worker in a regional school has different impacts on student wellbeing than it does in matched metropolitan schools as outlined in table 3.*

**H₃**. *The presence of a pastoral care worker in any given school has different impacts on student wellbeing from those of other schools with a pastoral care worker as outlined in table 3.*

Unless otherwise specified, only data that could meet the 90 percent level of statistical significance was presented in the quantitative sections of this report. As can be seen summarised in Table 12 (below), the WEC data items nominated reached statistical significance in comparisons between Metro PCW and Regional PCW groups, and Regional PCW and Regional Non PCW groups, indicating that there may be evidence to reject $H_0$. However, caution should be exercised when using the results of this study as it cannot be stated with any certainty, how much of the differences observed were due to the presence or non-presence of a PCW, and how much were due to other influences such as geographic location, access to services and infrastructure, socioeconomic status of the region, and social climate. The lack of consistent significant differences between PCW and non-PCW groups may suggest that PCWs are an equalising rather than differentiating force when it comes to well-being, and hence it is hard to find a lot of large significant differences now that NSCP is so well established and that almost all schools have PCWs.

Table 12: WEC data hypotheses

| Domain/Hypothesis | $H_1$ | $H_0$ | $H_2$ | $H_3$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Significant at the 90 percent level or higher. | | | |
| **Emotional wellbeing** | | | | |
| Happiness | R/M & R/R | | | |
| Optimism | R/M | | | |
| Satisfaction with life - insufficient data available | | - | | |
| Emotion regulation - insufficient data available | | - | | |
| Sadness | R/M & R/R | | | |
| Worries– insufficient data available | - | | | |
| **Engagement with school** | | | | |
| Important adult at school | NS | | NS | NS |
| Connectedness to school | R/M & RR | | R/M & RR | R/M & RR |
| Emotional engagement with teachers - insufficient data available | | | | |
| School climate | R/M & RR | | R/M & RR | R/M & RR |
| School belonging | R/M & RR | | R/M & RR | R/M & RR |
| Peer belonging – from the literature review, children defined wellbeing as their relationships with others | R/M | | | R/M |
| Friendship intimacy– from the literature review, children defined wellbeing as their relationships with others | R/M & R/R | | | |
| Physical bullying – may not have influence over incidence as may be more to do with School Leadership or culture. | R/M | R/M | | |
| Verbal bullying – may not have influence over incidence as may be more to do with School Leadership or culture. | R/M & R/R | R/M & R/R | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social bullying– may not have influence over incidence as may be more to do with School Leadership or culture. | R/M & R/R | R/M & R/R | | |
| Cyberbullying– may not have influence over incidence as may be more to do with School Leadership or culture. | R/M | R/M | | |
| **Learning readiness** | | | | |
| Perseverance | R/R | R/R | | |
| Cognitive engagement – insufficient data available | - | - | | |
| Academic self-concept | R/M & R/R | | | |
| **Health and wellbeing out of school** | | | | |
| Overall health | | R/M & R/R | | |
| Body image - not selected because it only asks about weight | | | | |
| Nutrition - breakfast | R/M & R/R | | | R/M & R/R |
| Sleep – insufficient data available | - | | | |
| Music and arts | | R/M | | |
| Sports – insufficient data available | | - | | |
| Organised activities | R/M | | R/M | R/M |

S = probability of T statistically significant at 90 percent level or higher, therefore can reject $H_0$.

R/M = Regional PCW compared to Metro PCW.

R/R = Regional PCW compared to Regional Non PCW.

NS = No significant difference at the 90 percent or higher level of statistical significance.

Returning to our research questions:

1. *Does the presence of a pastoral care worker in a school impact on student wellbeing?*
2. *Does the presence of a pastoral care worker impact on student wellbeing in different ways in regional schools when compared with metropolitan schools?*

There was evidence of differences between the WEC responses of students from schools in the Metro PCW versus Regional PCW groups, and Regional PCW versus Regional Non PCW groups, for variables within the WEC survey. Variables that show a significant difference in 2015 but no significant difference in subsequent years are likely moving closer together in terms of their comparative values. Likewise, variables that show significant differences in 2019, are likely moving further apart in terms of their comparative values.

Figure 10 depicts the WEC variables that attained comparative statistical significance in either 2015, 2017, or 2019 across the groups. In the intersecting vector, the first value is the number of significant differences between Regional PCW and Metro PCW and the second value is the number of significant differences between Regional PCW and Regional Non PCW. It is noteworthy that friendship has the second highest number of significant differences for both Metro and Regional comparisons. It also appears that school climate and perseverance may be useful differentiating factors when comparing Regional PCW and Regional Non PCW groups, as school climate appears once, and perseverance does not appear, in Regional v Metro PCW significant differences. Optimism, verbal bullying, physical bullying, cyber bullying, peer belonging, organised activities, music and arts, may be useful differentiating factors between Regional PCW and Metro PCW. A further analysis of which of these variables displayed a significant difference in 2019 is presented in Tables 13 and 14 below.

Figure 10: WEC variables with one or more instance of significant difference (2015, 2017, 2019) – School Year Levels 4 to 6, 7 to 9, and 10 to 12

**Regional PCW v Metro PCW**

- optimism (6)
- physical bullying (5)
- cyber bullying (3)
- peer belonging (3)
- organised activities (2)
- music & arts (2)

- friendship (5, 4)
- school climate (1, 5)
- verbal bullying (5, 1)
- overall health (3, 3)
- sadness (3, 2)
- social bullying (3, 1)
- connectedness to school (2, 2)
- happiness (2, 1)
- breakfast (2, 1)
- school belonging (1, 1)
- academic self (1, 1)

**Regional PCW v Regional Non PCW**

- perseverance (0, 1)

Table 13: Regional PCW v Metro PCW (2019)

| Variable | Reporting |
|---|---|
| optimism | More medium/high optimism, 4 to 6 |
| | More high & medium optimism, 7 to 9 |
| | Less high optimism, 10 to 12 |
| friendship | More medium/high friendship, 4 to 6 |
| | More medium/high friendship, 7 to 9 |
| cyber bullying | More medium cyber bullying , 7 to 9 |
| overall health | More medium/high overall health, 7 to 9 |
| | More medium/high overall health, 4 to 6 |
| social bullying | More medium/high social bullying, 10 to 12 |
| connectedness to school | More medium/high connectedness to school, 10 to 12 |
| music & arts | More high music & arts, 4 to 6 |

*As at 2019, the most obvious difference between Regional PCW and Metro PCW is optimism. In Regional PCW low optimism is less prevalent for Year Level 4 to 6, and optimism is generally higher for Year Level 7 to 9, but optimism is less high for Year Level 10 to 12. Cyber bullying is higher as indicated by more medium and less low reporting of cyber bullying in Regional PCW.*

Variables for which the gap between Regional PCW and Metro PCW has closed or is likely moving towards closing are physical bullying, verbal bullying, sadness, breakfast, happiness, organised activities, academic self, school belonging, and school climate.

Table 14: Regional PCW v Regional Non PCW (2019)

| Variable | Reporting |
|---|---|
| friendship | More high and less low friendship, 10 to 12 |
| overall health | More low overall health, 4 to 6 |
| | More medium/high overall health, 7 to 9 |
| perseverance | More medium/high perseverance, 4 to 6 |
| | More low perseveranace, 10 to 12 |
| happiness | More medium/high happiness, 4 to 6 |
| verbal bullying | More low verbal bullying, 10 to 12 |

*As at 2019, the clear differences between Regional PCW and Regional Non PCW are higher friendship, less perseverance, and potentially less verbal bullying, for Year Level 10 to 12.*

Variables for which the gap between Regional PCW and Regional Non PCW has closed or is likely moving towards closing are school climate, connectedness to school, sadness, academic self, breakfast, school belonging, and social bullying.

## Limitations – quantitative analysis

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that caution should be exercised when interpreting or applying the quantitative results of this study, due to being unable to determine how much of the differences between PCW and Non PCW groups observed, were due to the presence or non-presence of a PCW, or due to other factors. Additionally, while some 1252 respondent records made up the full sample used, the sample size was relatively small for each Year Level group, time frame, and category examined. Methodologically, this was a purposively selected sample and not a random sample. Schools were selected first for their Regional PCW provider and then were matched to Metro PCW and Regional Non PCW schools, to create the selections for the groups of Regional PCW, Metro PCW, and Regional Non PCW. Additionally, the WEC is a voluntary survey in terms of school participation and student participation, and therefore volunteer bias may also be present. Hedges g was calculated to provide an effect size for analysis and the probability of T calculated to determine if in effect, the null hypothesis could be rejected. While the T-Tests appear to be returning functionally correct results, the results should not be applied outside the specific confines of this study due to the small sample size and purposive sample design. The results presented in this report are statistically significant only in the context of the schools selected for inclusion and should not be used to form broad conclusions about the efficacy of other PCW providers or the overall efficacy of PCWs in other schools.

## Conclusions from quantitative analysis

The results obtained suggest that outcomes may be different for different age groups as portrayed by school year levels and different geographic locations such as metropolitan and regional. From the results it is evident that some variables did not retain a statistically significant difference over time, and this may suggest that PCWs are an equalising rather than differentiating force when it comes to well-being, and hence it is hard to find a lot of large significant differences now that PCW is so well established in South Australia. The content of this report may provide an indication that PCWs can influence student wellbeing, however, caution should be exercised when using the results, as it cannot be stated with any certainty, how much of the differences observed were due to the presence or non-presence of a PCW, and how much were due to other influences such as geographic location, access to services and infrastructure, socioeconomic status of the region, and social climate.

# Qualitative findings

Interview data indicate that the pastoral care program (or any program that supports student wellbeing) is very much appreciated and needed in regional schools. Further, according to our participants, more student support measures are essential if we are to take seriously student wellbeing than the measures that are currently available or accessible. Most of the school principals described witnessing significant reductions in the socio-economic status of their school communities over recent years and gave many and complex reasons for this.

Principals would welcome more hours for PCWs and any increase from the current levels of support for student wellbeing. PCWs reported being unable to keep up with the demand needed by students in their schools. In agreement with the school principals, PCWs felt that the position needed more hours – although given the often emotionally draining nature of the work, they tended to state that if hours were increased the position would need to be split between workers to protect worker wellbeing and prevent burnout and vicarious trauma.

This section is structured according to the key themes that emerged from interview data that contribute to answering our research questions. We have divided the findings into two sections to present findings relating to: 1) the pastoral care worker role; and, 2) the experience of working in schools in the South Australian regional context. Emergent themes include the approaches and types of activities PCWs use to engage and support students and their experiences of working in country contexts. We also note where qualitative findings directly intersect with the WEC data results and provide possible explanations for differences and similarities.

## Pastoral Care Worker role

Both the PCWs and school principals identified that the most important feature of the PCW role is being someone who has time to listen to students without being required to end a conversation or session to attend to other (e.g. teaching/timetabled) obligations. School principals tended to describe the PCW role as one which provides their wellbeing team with 'an extra pair of hands' and students with someone they could trust who was not a teacher - 'a friendly face'. Further, principals spoke about the types and levels of student needs or distress that PCWs were qualified to attend to. They provided clear delineation around what they viewed as the PCW role boundaries.

In practice, it appeared that such lines of responsibility were somewhat blurry. While school principals and PCWs did what they could to maintain a stepped approach, with PCWs avoiding going beyond their level of expertise, students' complex lives and the lack of higher level supports in regional schools mean that there are no (or extremely limited) other options available beyond what the wellbeing team (including the PCW) can offer. Thus, the PCWs may refer to the wellbeing leader, but often times the wellbeing leader is also insufficiently qualified to provide the support that students require. Moreover, despite the delineation of responsibility meaning that the wellbeing leaders' responsibilities were higher than those of the PCW, the PCW may have higher wellbeing – relevant qualifications than the wellbeing leader.

The main challenge that both principals and PCWs identified with the role, besides insufficient hours and higher level support, related to difficulties filling the position because of a mismatch between school community, (previous) provider contractual obligations and/or the availability of candidates that are able to meet the contractual obligations. Further, participants acknowledged that some families in the school communities were opposed to their children accessing the service, based on religious or cultural reasons, ultimately meaning that they were excluded from the service.

Given that one of the research questions was to explore whether PCWs used whole-of-school or individual approaches in their role, interview questions were designed to tease this out. Generally, PCWs used a mix of individual and whole-of-school approaches, however the school principals tended to express a broader, whole-of-school view, doing what they could to ensure that the wellbeing team as a unit provided whole-of-school support. Indeed, especially in larger and lower category schools (higher disadvantage), it was virtually impossible for PCWs to truly provide whole-of-school support, with the exception of having some influence on school culture, which is explored in more detail later. A few of the PCWs spoke about being more structured with their time, but having flexibility within that, as Caitlin noted:

> *I have one on one sessions - some people just focus on the class and group sessions and sort of have activities pre-planned by teachers or like their well-being officers and things like that. Whereas I'm sort of given the opportunity to create individual programs or things that I feel students need support with on an individual basis. So because we have such a vast array of kids that come here from so many different needs - and obviously my goal is just to keep them engaged in school. That's all that I really want to achieve for them (Caitlin, PCW).*

Some of the PCWs also worked as a School Services Officer (SSO) in their schools. This appeared to work well, particularly where the PCW was able to make clear delineations between the two roles. Further, it meant that they could slip into the PCW role if needed, if the school could allow that flexibility:

> *She also very good at kind of switching between [roles]. So she knows that if she was only here 10 hours a week, you get into that appointment stage […] or pick up a conversation a week ago on a Tuesday afternoon at 2 o'clock - that doesn't work with young people. So she's been really flexible to be able to change that time around during the week to offer that additional support (Nicholas, school principal).*

The dilemma of timetabling arose in most of the interviews. Some of the schools used timetabling so that they could make decisions about which students they identified as being most in need of support and divided students between the PCW and wellbeing leader, depending on the individual student's level of distress. On the other hand, some PCWs preferred students to have the opportunity to self-refer, viewing this as an important way for those students who may otherwise 'go under the radar' to access support, illustrated by Lily:

> *I find that the role is like a magnet. It draws those kids in. And you really - I think if you tuned in - I could go to work and just sit in the yard. They just come out and there they are. So, if you if you go trying to structure how that's going to happen and pre-empt things, I just feel like you miss a lot of the important work that that our role does capture […]. These kids don't know that they have an issue so much of the time. Or, they have an issue that they know they can't talk about - or they think they can't talk about. So if you're doing something, whatever that might be, then you're straight away, you're forming a connection that they might may not be getting at all in their life (Lily, PCW).*

It seemed that a mix of both of these approaches produced positive student outcomes, however, once again, it was clear across the interviews that the role in its current form does not come close to meeting all of the students' wellbeing needs, as Peter (school principal) said 'they're only the tip of the iceberg'.

School principals and PCWs spoke about the experience of working in small communities and the positives (and negatives) of that. For those PCWs who were from the community, or had lived in the community a long time and sometimes also had children in the same community, this meant that students likely already knew them outside school, which could strengthen the role, as described below:

*One of [PCW's] strengths in that area is probably how connected she is across our community. And she has been in our community for longer than I've been here [...]. So she's got an amazing network with lots of [...] families. So lots of our families feel really familiar and comfortable with [PCW]. So in terms of what that looks like. It's you know, it's hard to define, but sometimes it is just another level or layer of support between our teachers, our students and connections to our families (Martin, school principal).*

Most principals had experience working with several PCWs and spoke about the ways in which they collaborated with the school wellbeing team to match the PCW's skills and interests to students so that all students would (potentially) be able to engage with someone in the student wellbeing team, if not the PCW. School principals drew comparisons between different PCWs, explaining that not all PCWs worked well with all students. Examples included PCW gender and their specific interests, such as a PCW that uses sport to engage students may not attract students that are not sporty and conversely, a PCW that uses art as an engagement tool may not attract sporty students.

*So another one was into the arts and did all the drama shows and things like that. So the kids were learning those skills as they go. So I think that's probably the strength. And the weakness is the fact that they mostly use their strength to try and hook the kids in. But the kids have to be interested in that hook as well [...] I think [PCW] is more about the life skills and I think [PCW] understands that there's a lot going on at home for these kids, a lot going on in silence for these kids (Luke, school principal).*

Nevertheless, PCWs and school principals said that the most important way that PCWs engaged students was by drawing on their own interests or passions, such as art, gardening, or sport. They identified this as being because students could see that the PCW was genuinely interested in an activity rather than engaging in it because it fulfilled a curriculum requirement. Several of the participants also spoke about students being drawn to engage with PCWs because they were engaging in an activity, rather than actively seeking students. In this way, students could talk or not talk, which seemed to alleviate pressure, as described by Lily below:

*I think that it means that you're authentic. It means that there is a circuit breaker - that you can connect without staring at each other. You can both work quietly at something and that in itself can be therapeutic (Lily, PCW).*

The PCWs described a range of similar strategies that they use to engage students, although the actual activities were wide-ranging. Strategies included a mix of one-to-one work, group work, visiting classrooms, joining excursions and being available in the school yard during breaks. They also spoke about what they think works well, more specifically, in their schools. All participants spoke about the importance of flexibility in the role, within the context of working within the parameters of the wellbeing team. Those that engaged students in group-work tended to do so in ways that were student-led, or based on identified student needs, described as follows:

*Sometimes that's picking up many and varied things [e.g.] supporting small groups of students, running things like lunchtime activities. So [...] that sort of really gained some momentum in terms of offered some very structured, supervised play, which gives kids*

*some different opportunities, particularly if they're lacking confidence or certain sets of social skills out in the yard to actually sort of practice those in a really controlled and supervised area (Martin, school principal).*

The approaches and activities that the PCWs and the principals spoke about suggest that, despite the WEC data findings, that the PCW does represent an important adult at school, which we explore further below.

### Important adult at school

The WEC data indicate that there are no significant differences between student yes/no responses to the 'Important Adult at School' question for schools with or without PCWs. The qualitative data suggest, however, that the PCW role does provide a person to whom students may turn when they are experiencing difficulties affecting their wellbeing. Indeed, this seemed to be the main reason principals and PCWs gave for the role producing positive wellbeing outcomes for students. Participants spoke about the PCW as being the one person in the school that is able to spend time with a student and can provide students with unconditional and undivided attention. While the PCWs tended to only have 10-12 hours per week in their school, that time could be allocated flexibly, illustrated by the following:

*They're not having to rush off to something else so they can just sit and chat and they're not thinking, 'well, I've really got go and get my lesson marked' or 'go do some photocopying before the next lesson'. So I think that for the kids, that's the best thing - that they're not in a hurry (Olivia, school principal).*

Participants gave the sense that PCWs could stay and listen to students, which meant that students would be encouraged to feel that they are valued and that their problems or needs are important - to at least one adult in the school. On discussing the WEC question regarding an important adult at school, one of the principals stated that she suspected students may not consider selecting 'yes' because the PCW is not a teacher, a sentiment all the principals expressed, with the statement below being typical:

*The lovely aspect about it is, that they know that, if they need someone, they'll go and seek [PCW] out about that, you know, which is great (Martin, school principal).*

There were many similar examples throughout the interviews of both principals and PCWs describing the role as a trusted adult that students tended to seek out.

### Friendship

Friendship has been identified as having an important influence on children's wellbeing, which is why it is included in the WEC survey and was one of the key areas of work that PCWs focussed on. Indeed, PCWs spoke about the effects that friendships have on student wellbeing and behaviour at school as being one of the main reasons for them to work with students. Activities with friendship groups was one of the avenues that PCWs described using to foster student relationship-building skills. Some of the PCWs described working with friendship groups who had experienced a falling out, illustrated by Caitlin below:

*[I'm working with] a friendship group of girls that sort of love to hate one another. So, I like to try and sort of distinguish healthy relationships and those sorts of things - so that will run for the whole term (Caitlin, PCW).*

Julie described ways that she worked with students who were not getting along as follows:

*I'll often take two children that aren't actually getting along really well. Take them to play games together with them as a group. Get them to identify what they actually like about each other and having them actually experiencing somebody saying nice things about them that they don't normally hear (Julie, PCW).*

School principals and PCWs not only recognised the importance of friendships to student wellbeing, but also discussed ways in which healthy relationships at school contributed to an overall positive school culture.

### Sadness

Interview data suggest that another key PCW role is to attend to student sadness. Interview participants described ways in which teachers and wellbeing leaders identified students that seemed sad and notified the PCW so that they may keep an eye on them, illustrated by Martin's account below:

*I very much see that a pastoral care worker is there to provide that first point of contact. So if a teacher saying, 'oh, Josie looks sad today', I comment to the pastoral care worker. She might go over and find out what's going on. And then, you know, pass that information back to the teacher or let [wellbeing leader] know if it's a higher level type thing. So someone has got the flexibility and the role to go and have that relationship with the kids and look at what levels of support they can offer them, I think is really significant for us (Martin, school principal).*

Again, participants spoke a great deal about the importance of flexibility in the PCW role, enabling them to take the time to build relationships with students which can lead students to reveal what is making them feel sad. Several participants identified this as being an important first step in supporting student wellbeing which can go unnoticed, or unmeasured, because it works as a preventative or protective factor against students requiring formal behaviour management intervention. Moreover, the PCW role offers the space and opportunity for students to explore their feelings in a non-threatening environment when they may not have such space in their lives, as Lily articulated:

*These kids don't know that they have an issue so much of the time. Or, they have an issue that they know they can't talk about - or they think they can't talk about. So if you're doing something, whatever that might be, then you're straight away, you're forming a connection that they might may not be getting at all in their life (Lily, PCW).*

While it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the PCW role has influenced student WEC data responses to sadness questions, the interview data suggest that school wellbeing teams are working to identify student sadness and that PCWs make efforts to support students experiencing sadness.

### Physical bullying

While the WEC data suggest that physical bullying rates may be higher in regional schools than metropolitan schools, interview participants did not speak a great deal about physical bullying. They did, however, speak about the effects of trauma on student behaviour – with students acting out with violence being one of the consequences of trauma. Peter's description below illustrates how having a PCW in his school has changed the ways in which some students have developed help-seeking skills to deal with their emotional responses to specific situations:

*The number one thing we find is that the students that [PCW and Wellbeing Leader] work with are more inclined to come and talk and open up. Whereas before they were bottling everything up because they had no support, they didn't know who to go to see*

*or they couldn't trust this person or trust that person. And so they would they would just bottle it all up . And then at some stage, someone would just say the wrong thing and they would just explode .[And] if the explosion turns into violence -I don't get any choice but to suspend them from school - but all that's doing is keeping everyone else safe because there's no outside agencies we can refer them to who have the expertise the help some of these kids. We don't have the expertise to work with them. We're teachers , not psychologists.*

*But what we do find is that if [PCW] is not here on that particular day, they're more inclined then to still come in either talk to me or to [Wellbeing Leader] and open up and tell us what's wrong. And that's been huge, because once they start opening up and talking to us, then we can start helping them (Peter, School Principal).*

Peter's account speaks to a cross-cutting theme of the PCW working with students in ways that support their development of help-seeking skills and of recognising their emotional responses, which may have some effect on the various forms of bullying. Similarly, Nicholas spoke about the ways in which the PCW worked with older boys at their school:

*They also have a sense of purpose, basically a sense of achievement […]. But for some of the older boys, if they're having a bad time, […] she'll get them moving bricks or blocks of stone around and sometimes I'm sure they don't realise she's just keeping them busy, because while they're doing that, they're talking to her. […] She can pick up what the problem is, just by being there [and] they'll turn up and [help] her just because they want to give something back (Nicholas, school principal).*

While the participants could not provide measurement of effects of having a PCW on their bullying rates, they provided accounts of their observations of behaviour in students that may have led to negative consequences without the PCW. Olivia, one of the school principals, stated that 'I could 100 percent do it with their behaviour data' to demonstrate that 'the number of blow ups and suspensions' had reduced significantly since the PCW had worked with students. Thus, the PCW role was viewed as one of prevention of negative behaviour as much as one of support for student wellbeing.

*Summary*

To summarise this section, it is clear from the qualitative data that the PCW role is very much appreciated in schools and is likely to be promoting individual student wellbeing. Our findings suggest that PCWs are working in areas which have been identified as important to enhancing student wellbeing, such as being a friendly adult for students to seek support from at school, facilitating students' development of positive friendships, supporting students to address sadness, and supporting students to develop help-seeking skills. **Our findings suggest that the following approaches to the role are likely to produce positive outcomes for student wellbeing:**

- **Flexibility** – being able to work across the school, with individuals and groups
- **Availability** – student wellbeing needs cannot always be timetabled
- **Teamwork** – being part of the wellbeing team, complementing others' skills
- **Authenticity** – PCW using their own interests and passions as a 'hook'
- **Community-minded** – being part of, or familiar with, the school's community
- **Kind** – students respond well to kindness, friendliness, and honesty
- **Recognition** – that the PCW is trained in mental health and referrals.

## Regional context

In this section, we explore the school context and how PCWs may be influencing overall school culture and producing whole-of-school outcomes.

### School culture – a sense of belonging

One of the main positive outcomes that participants identified as resulting from having a PCW in their schools was the effect on school culture. In some of the schools, one of the main roles for PCWs is to spend time supporting new students to transition into their schools. The principals described the positive effects of this for new students and therefore the whole school culture as follows:

> If they're feeling welcomed, if they're feeling cared for and supported, it helps them build that confidence and to build those skills. [PCW] makes herself pretty familiar, really quickly, well known to our new families (Martin, school principal).

Several participants spoke about the high levels of transience of their school populations, and they viewed being able to support new students and provide 'a friendly face' as being key to fostering and maintaining a positive school culture. Moreover, PCWs demonstrating understanding and support to students, rather than offering platitudes, also seemed to be helpful, with Kayla stating:

> So, you know, when kids are having a rough day or they might have an eating disorder or they've got parents doing drugs. You don't want someone saying to them 'it's gonna get better' because I don't think kids are going to really respect that. Whereas sometimes, I've said to the kid, 'life is shit. It is. And it's not fair and it sucks. But, you know, what are we going to do and how can we work through this together?' [Then] It's like, 'hey, you know', they look forward to when you come to school, because it's another friendly face and someone that they can trust (Kayla, PCW).

In these ways, some of PCWs were able to produce positive whole-of-school outcomes by being available to students, by being welcoming to new students and facilitating their transition to the school and by being honest. In short, PCWs were able to spend time building relationships with students, which seemed to have a whole-of-school effect.

### Lack of services

All participants spoke about an appalling lack of services – especially mental health services – for young country people. Participants divulged several horrific stories regarding the experiences of students in their schools, most of which could be identifying to include in this report and so are omitted. While students living in metropolitan areas are very sadly experiencing similar levels of trauma, those living in regional South Australia have extremely limited access to services that might be able to support them. In some schools, the wellbeing team, and in particular the PCW, were the only people who are actually available for children.

> CAMHS comes into our community, but it's very much a reactive service and it's for top tier kids and families that are identified and they'll come in [every] four to six weeks, eight weeks, maybe, and it'll be a flying visit for a day where they're meeting four, six families, kind of out in the community (Martin, school principal).

School principals described how their school community demographics had changed over the past decade, with increasing levels of poverty, deprivation, and transience. They described the ways in which such abject poverty and marginalisation meant that many parents are drug and/or alcohol dependent

and find it difficult to provide their children's basic daily needs. Nevertheless, they also described ways in which the PCWs did what they could to support students; Peter illustrated this as follows:

> *[Our school is] one of the most disadvantaged schools. We have a lot of students here from one parent families. We have a significant number of students who've suffered trauma and are still experiencing trauma in their lives . And without the PCW, we would struggle to support these kids, even with a PCW. We are still struggling with the numbers of kids that require assistance. But all of the [PCWs] that we've had take on this job have been fantastic. They've worked very closely with the student wellbeing leader - who used to be called the school counsellor […] we have significant issues with [parental] drug and alcohol abuse and that affects a lot of our students at this school. They have no money. They rely on us supplying food through their breakfast club programs, emergency lunches and things like that (Peter, school principal).*

Peter, like the majority of participants, went on to describe the dire lack of local services and that this means that students are often unable to attend school, with the consequences of falling 'behind in their schooling. It's just becoming a bigger and bigger issue. As we go day by day, it becomes a bigger issue'. The PCWs spoke about the lack of services as well, although they also spoke about the online and telephone services that are available, as noted by Steph:

> *We're a little bit isolated and we don't have a lot of services at [town]. So it's kind of, the doctor and then they get referred from the doctor. And generally, I don't do a lot of referring. I kind of always talk to [wellbeing leader] before we do that sort of stuff. […]. But you kind of pick up on things being maybe a bit beyond. [We have] the kids help line and that sort of stuff if you think it would benefit that person to have a chat with. We can facilitate that at school here - I've done that a couple of times. Just so then they can then talk to somebody (Steph, PCW).*

To reiterate, one of the major challenges to supporting student wellbeing in regional areas is the lack of in-person mental health services. While organisations such as Headspace are available online, the only centres across the footprint of this study, where a young person may see someone face-to-face, are in Port Augusta, Whyalla and Port Lincoln.

## Being part of the community

Participants spoke about the positives and negatives of working in a regional context, some of which has been noted above. Being known in the local community meant that students were more likely to feel comfortable with the PCW. However, this also poses difficulties for PCWs to set boundaries when outside of work, as expressed below:

> *So that was that was probably tricky just finding the balance. But I think I have got it now and I feel much better about it. Because you don't ever want anyone to feel like they're not important - that you only want to talk to them when you're paid to (Steph, PCW).*

Further, there are potentially privacy issues, for example if the PCW knows what has happened in a family context, but also needs to be mindful of not over-stepping privacy boundaries at work, in addition to maintaining personal boundaries for their own wellbeing, as noted by Nicholas:

> *Therefore, it is hard at the same time for people like [PCW] to escape from being the intermediary with some of the more needy families, if she sees them out and about. And in a way, there's a real positive there, because she can actually see what's going*

*on - in a small town, like, you know, when the police are knocking on the doors and things like that. So she's got like kind of inside information. But it is also quite challenging to clock off (Nicholas, school principal).*

PCW recruitment and professional development

One of the main challenges that participants highlighted for regional schools were the difficulties they encountered in recruiting a PCW that could meet the contractual obligations of their employer. Whilst all providers are required to recruit according to minimum skills and qualifications (or equivalent) set out in the NSCP project agreement, some providers include additional requirements that can hinder the community capacity to fill the position, as described below:

*We knew that we had someone [PCW] really wanting to be in the role who we felt would be fantastic, but the employer wouldn't allow that […]. We were just going 'this is the nature of our community'. You know, we're a [community type], kind of place that people kind of cruise their way through. We do have generational families here who've got different sets of values, perhaps, but it just didn't kind of reflect where our community was at, at the time. So when we changed over to a different provider […] there was just genuine relief that we could put someone in the position and get another support in place in the school. The parents are very pleased about that (Martin, school principal).*

Participants spoke about it being challenging to find a person in their local communities who was appropriately qualified for the role. Therefore, where the employer imposed further conditions, such as requiring the person to take an active role in a local church or that the person cannot live with their partner unless they are married, this meant that some schools were unable to meet these conditions. It was only through word of mouth, for example speaking with other regional principals, that schools in this situation were able to find out that there were providers that did not impose these additional restrictions on the role.

The recruitment process overall was viewed as extremely smooth where the school principal and wellbeing leader were included on selection panels. This process ensured that the person would be a good fit for the school context and for the students. Participants discussed the ways in which they would orient a new PCW to their schools, in addition to the usual school staff induction. From the PCW perspective, being able to accept feeling like you are not doing much because 'being there' is one of the most important aspects of the role, as described by Lily:

*It's the importance of just being there, the fact that you're there. Consistently, that you're a consistent person, that you're being yourself and the other thing equally as important is just to trust your instincts. […] I think, when it comes to sitting down with a child, obviously, you need to understand things about trauma and behaviour, but if you're there with just compassion, you can sort of throw it all out and just go with what's in that moment and be there supporting the child (Lily, PCW).*

Similarly, Kayla spoke about the importance of rapport building:

*It's all about the rapport building. That's the one thing that I've found is that you can't just walk in and expect to change a kid's life. You've got to build that relationship with them. And that's been, I guess, the greatest thing about having this job, is you are able to work with these kids and able to change some aspects of their lives just by, you*

*know, just sitting with them at lunch time or assisting them with their homework, it's in camps or excursions - being able to really connect with these kids (Kayla, PCW).*

School principals spoke about ways in which they would support a new PCW to fit their role in with the school culture and the existing support structures and to use their own personal qualities and interests to start building relationships, as follows:

*The unique culture of the school means they've got to have time to actually find where the role fits within the school, not try and be what the last person was, because the last person would have had different relationships. [...] They can get very lost very quickly because there's not the clarity of the role at times, because the role is - it changes with every school and it will change on a day to day basis [...]. You've got to get some interest and say 'it is all about the relationships' (Nicholas, school principal).*

Secondly, school principals emphasised the importance of maintaining boundaries around the role because, as outlined above, the needs in their schools far outweigh the capacity of the role, with Olivia's statement being typical:

*And where does your job stop  and somebody else's job start. And that's even within the school, you know, within the context of the school as well as within the context of care of young people. You know, it's hard to sometimes switch off, so, also trying to give them some strategies and things so that they're not going home and taking the lives of those young people and their worries with them is pretty important [...]. And we all will say, 'well, no, you can't pick that kid up yet because you've already got these five kids that you're working with' [...] because they're caring, nice people (Olivia, school principal).*

Participants also spoke about the positives and negatives of participating in additional training once PCWs were in the position. PCWs described attending training and professional development that their school and their provider prescribed as well as being able to request training that they felt would support them in their role. It seemed that in general, PCWs were able to negotiate training attendance in ways that did not disrupt student time. However, some PCWs and school principals expressed discontent at the number of hours that PCWs would be expected to spend outside the student-service role, as expressed by a school principal below:

*They're also asking for her to do all these different trainings that they have these people doing , which takes her away for what she's supposed to be doing . And that's working with kids here [...], so we've had two full days of training in understanding children with trauma and looking at strategies we can use to work with those kids. Sure, we need to be involved in that sort of stuff because that's her bread and butter at this school. That's what she's employed to do . But she's finding it really difficult to continue to do what [provider wants her to do] (Peter, school principal).*

It appeared that there are potential challenges to finding a balance where the PCW feels connected to their employer organisation (and other PCWs) as well as being connected to their school and meeting their requirements. It seems that there is some risk of tension involved in meeting the requirements of virtually two employers while only having 10-12 hours per week. Nevertheless, PCWs spoke about the importance of their relationships with their provider-supervisors and school line-managers. PCWs spoke about the importance of

*I think we are probably last on everyone's list because we are that that bonus person and that's where [my supervisor] is fantastic. I know that she's always there if I need her and that any kind of professional support that I need, she'll do whatever she can to help (Lily, PCW).*

Similarly, some of the PCWs spoke about the helpfulness of being connected to other PCWs via email and telephone, so that they could share ideas and find solutions to challenges.

*Summary*

In this section, we have outlined the opportunities and challenges for the PCW role in regional schools. Regional school wellbeing teams are struggling to provide (including by referral) adequate support for students, even when they have a PCW in their school. There is extremely limited access to children's mental health and wellbeing services. With regard to the PCW role, working and living in the same community as the school presents both opportunities (e.g. familiarity with the school context, community and students) and challenges (e.g. setting boundaries between work-life and home/community-life) and suggestions for new PCWs. **Our findings suggest that the following approaches to supporting student wellbeing and enhancing the PCW role in regional contexts are likely to produce positive outcomes for student wellbeing:**

- **State-level** – increase student access to in-person professional support services
- **School-level** – provide flexible options e.g. 0.5FTE SSO/0.5FTE PCW position
- **Wellbeing team-level** – provide leadership support to ensure wellbeing officer/leader and PCW roles are complementary for the school context and student needs
- **Provider-level** – provide support to PCWs to foster PCW wellbeing (e.g. debriefing, burn out prevention)
- **Recruitment** – schools and providers work together to ensure PCW role contracts are appropriate for the school community context and student needs

# Study synthesis and recommendations

## What's the Problem?

We now turn to providing a brief synthesis of our findings into a program logic framework so that our findings can assist PCWs and schools in their work supporting children's wellbeing. We have drawn on Bacchi's (1999, 2012) *What's the Problem Represented to be?* (WPR) approach to policy analysis to produce a program logic model to summarise our interpretation of the interview and WEC data. We adapt this model to interpret the ways in which the school principals and the PCWs in this study spoke about the PCW role in terms of the logic driving the program, the program policy documents (as per the literature review) and what the WEC data tells us. We outline in the model what our data suggests works well to achieve program goals and what is left unproblematised that could be addressed to support the PCW role and to enhance student wellbeing. The questions we use, adapted from the WPR approach to form a program logic include:

7. What's the problem represented to be?
8. What remains unproblematised?
9. What's the current solution?
10. What are the activities?
11. What has been observed to work?
12. What are the anticipated outcomes?

In this section, we explore questions, providing a synthesis of our findings, summarised in a program logic (below, figure 11).

### 1. *What's the problem represented to be?*

Our findings indicate that study participants and project partners have identified and agree that regional student wellbeing is the central 'problem' that led to the decision to undertake the study which informs this report. Further, the WEC data indicate that student wellbeing is declining overall, in particular among students in higher year levels.

There are some differences in how the problem is represented by different stakeholders, evident in the solutions that they implement. We have developed our recommendations by undertaking a process of interpreting these differences to find solutions that we hope will be workable for all.

Our findings suggest that the Department for Education's student wellbeing policy (as it relates to NSCP implementation) represents the problem of poor student wellbeing as being one that may be mitigated by school wellbeing teams, including PCWs, funded by the NSCP. The Department for Education provides wellbeing resources that may be accessed by employees, including wellbeing leaders/officers, to assist them in their work. There is an assumption that CAMHS visits and online support such as Headspace are adequate for addressing students' poor mental health and supporting wellbeing.

We found that school principals represented the problem of poor student wellbeing as being an outcome of regional and socio-economic disadvantage. Examples of disadvantage that they provided, in addition to their schools becoming lower category schools in recent years, included their observations of increasing poverty and unemployment in their communities, students' parental drug and alcohol abuse, high levels of population (and student) transience, high rates of student child protection involvement and students' poor living environments. Principals tended to view the PCW role as an extra pair of hands in combatting an ever-growing problem and as being highly effective in addressing

individual student wellbeing and in improving school culture. Nevertheless, they also viewed the role as being inadequately funded (in terms of PCW hours) to be able to support all students effectively.

PCWs represented the problem of poor student wellbeing in their schools as being far beyond what their role can hope to mitigate. Participants provided examples of students that were unable to obtain timely or higher level, or adequate, mental health and wellbeing support beyond that provided by the Department for Education system (i.e. CAMHS). Further, they described their role as only being able to work with a limited number of students and that there were always many more that they could not help in the hours they had available, including when using a whole of school approach. School principal and PCW interviews suggest that there are too few hours for the role to meet demand.

### 2. *What remains unproblematised?*

This project has brought to the fore the inadequacy of the existing support structures for regional student wellbeing in South Australia. Much of these inadequacies are beyond the remit of the Department for Education, however, there are ways in which the Department may work with schools and PCW providers to counter the effects of extreme student disadvantage. For example, the Department could take greater advantage of regionally located community service providers and link students to existing youth or family services, particularly where formal youth mental health services are unavailable. Further, the Department for Education could consider approaches adopted in other states and territories, for example the establishment of school GP and psychologist programs (examples include Western Australia and Victoria).

The recruitment of PCWs is also currently unproblematised, with providers being able to include additional contractual obligations for PCWs beyond those outlined by the NSCP agreement. Current anti-discrimination laws allow for religious organisations to discriminate based on a candidate's marital status, sexual orientation, beliefs and religious practices. Nevertheless, the Department for Education could ask that providers avoid including such additional requirements for the PCW role, especially in regional areas where the pool of potential applicants is much smaller than in metropolitan areas.

### 3. *What's the current solution?*

The solution that this project focussed on is that of the PCW role. In South Australia, the NSCP is administered by the Department for Education with a view to enhancing student wellbeing. The Department for Education invites state, Catholic and independent schools to apply for funding to engage pastoral care workers (PCWs) in their schools. However, the PCW role is one part of a broader approach to supporting student wellbeing.

This project has ascertained, through literature review and interview data, that the current solution to the problem of poor student wellbeing in South Australia is a combination of: 1) the establishment of student wellbeing leaders in every government school (i.e. teachers with a wellbeing component included in their role, with FTE dependent on school size and need); 2) referral to other agencies including CAMHS, headspace schools, kids helpline; 3) the option to apply for a NSCP school PCW and, 4) providing professional development opportunities for school staff, e.g. childhood trauma training. There are other alternatives, for example other state and territory governments provide different solutions, with some providing school mental health practitioners, such as Western Australia (provides for more than 400 state school psychologist positions) and Victoria (0.5 FTE mental health practitioner, e.g. mental health nurse, social worker allocated to every Victorian Government secondary school by the end of 2021) (Department of Education, 2018, Department of Education and Training, 2020).
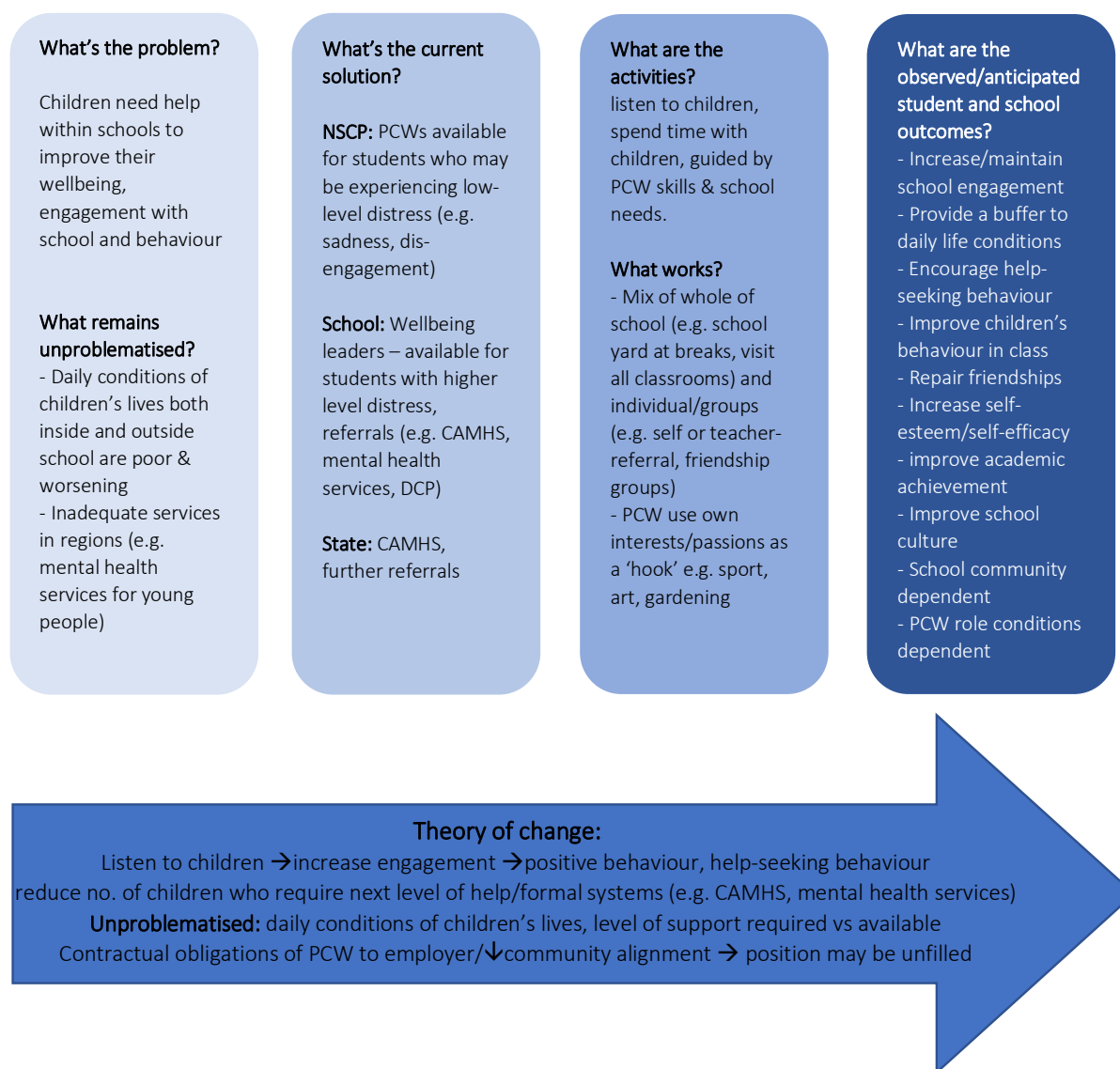
| What's the problem? | What's the current solution? | What are the activities? | What are the observed/anticipated student and school outcomes? |
|---|---|---|---|
| Children need help within schools to improve their wellbeing, engagement with school and behaviour | **NSCP:** PCWs available for students who may be experiencing low-level distress (e.g. sadness, dis-engagement) | listen to children, spend time with children, guided by PCW skills & school needs. | - Increase/maintain school engagement<br>- Provide a buffer to daily life conditions<br>- Encourage help-seeking behaviour<br>- Improve children's behaviour in class<br>- Repair friendships<br>- Increase self-esteem/self-efficacy<br>- improve academic achievement<br>- Improve school culture<br>- School community dependent<br>- PCW role conditions dependent |
| **What remains unproblematised?**<br>- Daily conditions of children's lives both inside and outside school are poor & worsening<br>- Inadequate services in regions (e.g. mental health services for young people) | **School:** Wellbeing leaders – available for students with higher level distress, referrals (e.g. CAMHS, mental health services, DCP)<br><br>**State:** CAMHS, further referrals | **What works?**<br>- Mix of whole of school (e.g. school yard at breaks, visit all classrooms) and individual/groups (e.g. self or teacher-referral, friendship groups)<br>- PCW use own interests/passions as a 'hook' e.g. sport, art, gardening | |

**Theory of change:**
Listen to children →increase engagement →positive behaviour, help-seeking behaviour
reduce no. of children who require next level of help/formal systems (e.g. CAMHS, mental health services)
**Unproblematised:** daily conditions of children's lives, level of support required vs available
Contractual obligations of PCW to employer/↓community alignment → position may be unfilled

Figure 11. Summary of findings applying WPR to a program logic model

### 4. *What are the activities?*

Our findings highlight that the activities that PCWs undertake are largely being guided by the needs of the school and the strengths of the individual PCW, as well as how their strengths may be best utilised in conjunction with and to complement the work of the wellbeing officer/leader. Those activities included, in the context of being part of the school wellbeing team, a mix of: being available to students who may be experiencing difficulties; using their own interests as a 'hook'; working with friendship groups; welcoming new students; and, spending time in classrooms and school yards.

### 5. *What has been observed to work?*

Our data suggests that the activities that the PCWs have been undertaking may be working by producing improved outcomes in some wellbeing domains, notably, friendship and school culture. According to the WEC data, having a PCW in regional schools may have an equalising effect on student wellbeing; that is, that the state-wide overall decline in student wellbeing may be slowed. School principal interview participants suggested that analysis of school behavioural and attendance data would

contribute to measuring and understanding student outcomes from PCW interventions. Their observations of the PCW role were that the role does influence student behaviour positively, by improving student wellbeing in the domains of friendship, help-seeking and school culture. The transient nature of disadvantaged populations means that while observations from larger qualitative surveys can provide an overall picture of student population wellbeing, it may not provide an accurate picture of individual schools, nor the outcomes of PCW work in their schools.

### 6. *What are the anticipated outcomes?*

Anticipated outcomes from interview participants included that, students who have worked with PCWs may: be more likely to seek help when they felt they needed support; be more likely to enjoy school; be more likely to develop positive social skills (e.g. in friendship groups); have fewer instances of requiring behaviour management interventions; and, have fewer school absences. Participants emphasised that outcomes such as improved whole-of-school wellbeing, with significant changes that may be found through large surveys such as the WEC, are outside the expectations of the PCW role. Study participants understood that large scale improvements to student wellbeing and mental health would require a substantial increase in support, providing example from other states such as school GPs and psychologists and changes to the conditions of students' lives outside school.

## Recommendations

Our findings suggest that the following approaches to the PCW role are likely to produce positive outcomes for student wellbeing:

- **Flexibility** – being able to work across the school, with individuals and groups
- **Availability** – student wellbeing needs cannot always be timetabled
- **Teamwork** – being part of the wellbeing team, complementing others' skills
- **Authenticity** – PCW using their own interests and passions as a 'hook'
- **Community-minded** – being part of, or familiar with, the school's community and/or region
- **Kindness** – students respond well to kindness, friendliness and honesty

Our findings further suggest that the following approaches to supporting student wellbeing and enhancing the PCW role in regional contexts are likely to produce positive outcomes for student wellbeing:

- **State-level** – increase student access to in-person professional support services
- **School-level** – provide flexible options e.g. 0.5FTE SSO/0.5FTE PCW position
- **Wellbeing team-level** – provide leadership support to ensure wellbeing officer/leader and PCW roles are complementary for the school context and student needs
- **Provider-level** – provide support to PCWs to foster PCW wellbeing (e.g. debriefing, burn out prevention)
- **Recruitment** – schools and providers work together to ensure PCW role contracts are appropriate for the school community context and student needs
- **Recognition** – that the PCW is trained in youth mental health and referrals.

We provide recommendations for providers, school wellbeing leadership teams and the Department for Education to assist PCWs to support young people to flourish as follows:

*Providers should:*

- Prioritise recruiting PCW candidates from the local school community or region where possible and seek exemptions from requiring the minimum qualifications (i.e. Certificate IV in Youth Work, Pastoral Care, or Chaplaincy and Pastoral Care including mental health and making referrals) where the selection panel (school and provider) determine that a strong candidate exists based on equivalent skills and experience.

- Consider ways to provide training that have less impact on the PCW's central role of providing student support, for example by providing a mix of interactive online and in-person training so that PCWs are also provided with opportunities to network and share experiences, and/or by sourcing additional resources for these activities.
- Avoid including additional contractual obligations (beyond those of the NSCP agreement) that may not align with the school community and local cultural context.
- Establish and ensure PCWs are familiar with organisational support structures (including but not restricted to the organisation's Employment Assistance Program) to mitigate risks of negative mental health effects of experiencing emotional distress because of the nature of the role and the risk of burn out and vicarious trauma.
- Furnish new PCWs with a toolkit that has been developed from the findings of this report, based on the key attributes of: flexibility, availability, teamwork, authenticity, community-minded, and kindness.
- Advocate for increased PCW hours for regional schools, prioritising those schools that are: 1) furthest from in-person child and adolescent mental health services, 2) experiencing highest levels of disadvantage.

*School leadership teams should:*

- Recognise that PCWs are required to have the capacity to refer and follow up students who they identify as requiring mental health support beyond that provided by the school wellbeing team. The current structure can lead to the presumption that the wellbeing officer/leader is more highly qualified for referral than the PCW, however the wellbeing officer/leader may not possess mental health or referral training.
- Ensure that the PCW is an integral person in the wellbeing team with input into school approaches to supporting student wellbeing.
- Consider offering a part-time School Services Officer role to PCWs in such a way that this role can be flexible, so that PCWs are available to students over more of the school week.
- Consider adopting the Wellbeing Classroom Approach to support the role of the PCW and to improve whole of school student wellbeing.
- Be centrally involved in the recruitment of PCWs and where possible contribute to matching candidate skills and experience to the school community culture and that complement the existing wellbeing team.

*The Department for Education should:*

- Increase support for student wellbeing in regional schools. Online and infrequent CAMHS visits are inadequate and inappropriate for promoting and supporting student wellbeing.
- Consider additional mental health and wellbeing support for schools such as through the provision of school psychologists, and by training wellbeing leaders so that they possess youth mental health, counselling and referral expertise at least to the same level as PCWs.
- Leverage existing or provide additional resources to increase the number of PCW hours at regional schools, in particular to those that are experiencing greatest disadvantage.
- Provide leadership regarding PCW recruitment. Providers should be encouraged to develop PCW contracts that align with the NSCP agreement, match community context and focus on student wellbeing (rather than provider preference).
- Consider amending the current requirements for exemption applications for regional, rural and remote schools from requiring the minimum qualifications (i.e. Certificate IV in Youth Work, Pastoral Care, or Chaplaincy and Pastoral Care including mental health and making referrals) to reduce the required vacancy length where the selection panel (school and provider) determine that a strong candidate exists based on equivalent skills and experience.
- Facilitate the development of an evaluation framework to measure student outcomes associated with the PCW role, for example by analysing changes in student behaviour and absentee records of those students supported by/working with PCWs.

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