

PRINCIPAL'S BLOG – Adolescent Mental Health and Wellbeing

In my six years as a Principal, I have been troubled by the rise in the number of students diagnosed with mental health issues. Only yesterday, an article in our local paper highlighted that 1 in 4 students were struggling with a mental health issue and 1 in 7 students has had an episode in the past 12 months.

Anxiety, stress, relationship conflict, body image, grief, addiction and suicidal ideation – all are on the rise.

I am not a mental health expert. I am not trained to provide health care for students. But I do know how important it is for us to work together. Parents / Schools / Health Care Services. When we work together, we are a strong force. We can provide the wrap around services our young people need and are crying out for – some loudly, others in silence. We all want to work together to give our young people a bright future with a variety of opportunities.

The community who organised the Adolescent Mental Health and Wellbeing Expo last week represent the eight Catholic Secondary Schools here in the ACT: St Clare's, Daramalan, St Edmunds, St Francis Xavier, St John Paul II, Marist, St Mary MacKillop, and Merici Colleges. Together we educate over 7000 students from Canberra and surrounding NSW, and together we felt that is important to connect parents and carers, with the many agencies and services, both Government and private. This is a small step, but every small step leads us closer to a solution and closer to hope filled future for our young people.



Our children live in an incredibly fast paced world. We expect them not to just know their school content, be good at sports and learn an instrument, but to always be happy, have great friends, make sound decisions and to pass exams, get a job, be agile, creative, resilient, show initiative, be critical thinkers etc. There is a lot of pressure on our children, adolescents and young adults. We must show them unconditional love (as Parents) and provide a holistic education (as Schools) and deliver high quality support and assistance (as Health Providers).

The first guest speaker at the Expo was Dr Michael Gordon. Dr Gordon is an adolescent psychiatrist with over 25 years of experience. He has a special interest in adolescent depression. He has written several academic papers, book chapters, conducted clinical research and has also completed a clinical doctorate in this area. Currently, Michael is involved in research into school refusal and adolescent borderline personality disorders. Dr Gordon is also the Adjunct Clinical Associate Professor at Monash University. The second guest speaker was Dr Elizabeth Moore who was appointed late last year as the ACT Coordinator General of the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing. One of her roles is to oversee the coordination and integration of mental health services in the ACT.

A priority area for the Office (identified in their Workplan) is a review of Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing across the continuum.

We also welcomed Q&A Panel members: Fr Richard Thompson (Parish Priest), Georgia Houtson (GH Nutritionist), Martin Fisk (Menslink), Velissa Aplin (Project Manager; Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network) and Dr Arjun Khaira (Psychiatrist). The Panel offered insights on how to talk to young people about issues parents are concerned about such as eating disorders, self-care and suicidal ideation. Minister for Mental Health, Shane Rattenbury and Shadow Minister for Health, Vicki Dunne supported the event with their attendance.



Pictured: ACT Minister for Mental Health, Shane Rattenbury MLA, Merici College Principal, Loretta Wholley, and Velissa Aplin from The Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma Loss and Grief Network

A variety of stalls with agency representatives were also available to discuss issues and services with parents and carers, handing out cards and reference material. It was a very successful evening and well attended. Thank you for the combined Catholic secondary schools, the Catholic Education Office of Canberra Goulburn, the Archdiocese of Canberra Goulburn and ACU for their commitment.

Loretta Wholley
Principal

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