

## School chaplains need the right qualifications to protect vulnerable children: ACU child protection expert

Religious chaplains working in schools must be qualified to recognise and respond to child abuse and neglect, according to Australian Catholic University (ACU) child safety expert Professor Daryl Higgins.

Professor Higgins, the director of ACU's Institute of Child Protection Studies, welcomed the Federal Government's recent decision to allow schools to hire either a chaplain or a professionally qualified student welfare officer under the school chaplaincy program.

But he said ensuring chaplains had the right skills to protect children was vital.

"Chaplains are in a unique position to support the mental health and wellbeing of students, but we need to have people who are skilled in evidence-based programs and parental supports and who can recognise and respond to child abuse and neglect," Professor Higgins said.

"This is what we need to address the crisis of child protection and mental health issues."

Professor Higgins said schools also needed to have the power to hire chaplains directly, rather than through third-party agencies so they could assess their suitability for the role.

"If schools hire directly, rather than through third-party providers, they can ensure job ads don't include selection criteria about a person's religion but can instead focus on their skills in working with children, young people and their families," he said.

Professor Higgins, who co-authored a recent study examining the state of the nation's child protection workforce, said urgent upskilling was needed across the workforce to improve the ability of workers including teachers, early childhood educators, nurses, and GPs to identify and respond to risk factors.

The *Trends and needs in the Australian child welfare workforce* study found many staff were underqualified to recognise and assess the risk of child abuse and neglect and did not have opportunities to develop their skills.

Professor Higgins said the study showed staff in universal services like schools needed training in prevention strategies, intervention skills and the intensive supports needed by vulnerable families.

Other key findings of the study included:

- A lack of diversity among the workforce, which was inconsistent with population trends.
- A disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children with a disability, coming to the attention of statutory child protection services.
- Limited data on child welfare responsibilities and roles in sectors including education, early childhood, and health.

Link to report: <https://www.acu.edu.au/-/media/feature/pagecontent/richtext/about-acu/institutes-academies-and-centres/icps/docs/trends-and-needs-in-australian-child-welfare-workforces.pdf>