

ACPPA Position Paper - Mental Health of Primary Aged Students

About ACPPA - The Australian Catholic Primary Principals Association is the peak body representing Catholic Primary Principals in Australia. Formed in 1984, ACPPA represents Catholic Primary Principals and leaders from over 1220 primary schools and 150 combined primary/secondary schools, which educate more than 400,000 primary students, representing 20% of primary-aged children in Australia. ACPPA gives voice to contemporary issues facing education in Australia.

Executive Summary

Protecting the mental health of primary-aged students is essential to ensuring their overall wellbeing, academic success, and long-term development. Catholic primary schools play a significant role in fostering environments where children feel safe, valued, and equipped to manage life's challenges.

ACPPA calls for a unified and system-wide approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing. Through evidence-informed strategies focused on early intervention, safe and inclusive environments, strong school-family partnerships, student voice and agency, and enhanced staff capability, Catholic education can strengthen and safeguard the mental health of primary-aged students.

Background

Primary school years are marked by rapid cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual development. During this formative period, children may experience stressors including academic pressure, social conflict, family circumstances, trauma, or developmental differences. These factors can influence behaviour, engagement, relationships, and learning outcomes.

Early identification, preventative practices, and timely intervention are critical in reducing the likelihood of long-term mental health concerns. Catholic schools, grounded in the dignity of the human person and a commitment to pastoral care, are uniquely positioned to respond holistically to student wellbeing needs.

The increasing complexity of student wellbeing needs, combined with growing expectations on schools to provide mental health support, requires a coordinated and sustainable approach across Catholic education systems, governments, families, and community services.

Key Issues

Early Intervention

Schools require systematic processes to identify signs of anxiety, emotional distress, behavioural changes, or learning difficulties at the earliest opportunity. Timely access to appropriate support services remains a critical factor in preventing more significant mental health challenges from emerging.

Safe and Inclusive Environments

Students are more likely to thrive when they experience psychological safety, positive relationships, predictable routines, and a strong sense of belonging. Schools must continue to foster inclusive cultures that support diversity, respect, and wellbeing for all students.

Strong School–Family Partnerships

Effective support for student wellbeing depends on collaborative relationships between schools and families. Consistent communication, shared understanding, and early engagement when concerns arise are essential to achieving positive outcomes for children.

Student Voice and Agency

Children benefit when they are provided with meaningful opportunities to express their views, participate in decision-making, and develop self-awareness and self-advocacy skills. Student agency contributes significantly to resilience, engagement, and wellbeing.

Staff Capability

Teachers, school leaders, and support staff require ongoing professional learning to recognise and respond effectively to mental health concerns. Building staff confidence and capability in wellbeing literacy, trauma-informed practice, and early intervention remains a priority.

ACPPA Position

ACPPA affirms that a holistic and faith-informed approach is essential to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of primary school students. Mental health is not an adjunct to learning; it is foundational to student engagement, achievement, and flourishing.

ACPPA advocates for:

- A whole-school, preventative approach to wellbeing.
- Alignment of pastoral care, learning support, and behaviour management processes.
- Investment in staff capability, professional learning, and leadership development.

- Strengthened collaboration between Catholic education authorities, governments, health services, and community agencies.
- Sustainable funding models that recognise the increasing complexity of student wellbeing needs.

To support these priorities, ACPPA recommends:

- Implementation of structured social and emotional learning programs across all year levels.
- Strengthening pastoral care processes and referral pathways for additional support.
- Promotion of calm, structured classroom practices that reduce cognitive and emotional overwhelm.
- Regular communication with families regarding wellbeing initiatives and available supports.
- Adoption of restorative practices that assist students to understand, regulate, and repair relationships.
- Maintenance of strong partnerships with external professionals and agencies when specialist intervention is required.

ACPPA believes protecting the mental health of primary-aged students is a shared responsibility across the Catholic education community. Catholic primary schools must be equipped with the structures, professional learning, resources, and systemic support required to respond proactively and compassionately to the mental health needs of every child.

ACPPA remains committed to advocating for policies, resources, and professional support that uphold the dignity, wellbeing, and flourishing of all students in Catholic primary education.