I suppose initially I thought, "What would a chaplain fit in?" Where I'd been in previous schools, I thought staff handled pastoral issues pretty well. So I was curious when a local school employed a chaplain through their own fundraising. It was a secondary school and it seemed to be a huge redirection of resources. I was curious because I'd assumed they were pretty well on top of their pastoral care, their wellbeing and direction for youth.

With many interested in the debate about the presence and role of chaplains in schools, I enjoyed the opportunity to speak with two local primary school principals - Neil Portard from Montrose Primary School, and Carolyn Elliott, not too far down the road at Penshurst Primary. Many thanks to them both for sharing their views. But I've interrupted Neil, who is in the process of explaining how his views on chaplaincy had changed. Sorry, Neil, please continue!

"So when I came here to Montrose, we already had someone who had had a chaplain. So I came to realise how valuable that service was. It wasn't in your face. It was very quiet, very effective," said Neil. "So I was quite surprised to notice each chaplain. Our program is now federally funded. Anna is our third and she works very much on the scenes, but is very persistent in supporting kids and families, and sometimes multiple kids and multiple families. It's a different approach.

"And interestingly, the funding body increased our funding so we were able to increase from one to one and a half days to help, and that's what caught our second chaplain out, as she was unable to commit to any more time away from the school. By contrast, Anna, not linked to a parish in any formal role, so for her it's been ideal. And she's working two days a week, which enables her to increase her coverage with more revisits. The needs are constantly changing. It's very rare for her to have any downtime, as she spends time working through both old and new issues."

I suggested that there was a need for pastoral care in schools had increased dramatically in recent years, and Carolyn responded:

"In times gone by, when many people had bigger families, and had much more contact with grandparents, aunts and uncles, and larger community friendship networks, people were able to turn to that extended family for support. But things have changed.

"There's much more isolation in our community now. Parents are having kids later, so the grandparents are not necessarily there. People tend to move around much more, too, so they're losing some of the networks that they would have had in the past."

"Nowadays the school is often regarded as a place that's solid, that's structured and constant, and to have a chaplain working within the school as another resource that parents can go to, helps to build a local relationship and provide a sounding board. Sometimes kids and parents don't know what to do, and to have this additional person who they can talk to, who's not judgmental and doesn't try to fix things for them, gives them the opportunity to almost catch breath, giving them time to verbalise and prepare for what they actually want to do.

"Having a chaplain in the school is valuable for teachers and staff, too," continued Carolyn, "because it's an outside person that you have a conversation with, a person who looks at things from another point of view. And to have someone who is non-judgmental is important, that all kinds of people look at their challenges, and the challenges of blended families, and all kinds of issues. So, as Neil mentioned, the great thing about chaplains is that they work behind the scenes.

"I asked whether chaplains are seen as part of the school staff team within the school community.

"The chaplain is one resource among many in the school, says Neil. "When parents come asking for help, what they really want to hear is that they are being listened to, and that they are not being judged, and even if you're unable to completely solve the matter at hand, they want to know that you've not thrown them to the curb. That you've been able to give them some roadmaps and told you've acted as best you can and that you've not left them at the curb.

"Being able to say 'would you like your child to see the chaplain?' provides them with another resource that everyone will be done to help. Schools have limited resources, and when a chaplain is in the school we have a valuable resource. And chaplains are very good at assisting and then following up a week later - generally helping to minimise a whole range of issues for parents. My experience has been that chaplains are that they are very calm. They are very measured, and very considered in what they say. They have that fear and apprehension, which helps school in general, but more importantly helps the kids."

Neil commented on the trust chaplains can establish:

"The first chaplain here was much loved and didn't start as a chaplain. So in a way he became a chaplain by a kind of osmosis. He didn't actually apply to be a chaplain, but because he was seen as very much an integral part of the school and the wider community, his work melded into something that gave that a little that said 'chaplain'."

"So that trust element was already there before he became a chaplain. For a new chaplain it takes a little time to re-establish trust - that you will handle things confidentially, that you're non-judgmental, that you're open to all those things. If people are actually going to ask for help, to put themselves on the line, they need to be confident about those things and that what they might share is not going to come back at them. And because our first chaplain had that trust it makes things easier for each successor to be viewed with similar trust.

"Neil observed that the school community grows to know what matters need to be dealt with by the principal or a teacher, and the kinds of things that would lead them to say 'I need to see the chaplain'. And as the relationship with teachers grows, the chaplain is a very encouraging and encouraging resource for them, too.

Both Neil and Carolyn agreed that it is important for the school to find the appropriate person for the school.

"You have to have a chaplain who fits the ethos of the school," said Carolyn. "The school's ethos has to match the ethos of the school, because as school leaders you place a lot of trust in this person. You wouldn't want to work with the chaplain whilst they're speaking with one of the children. So, you have to be on the same page about values, what you understand as well-being, and so on. So you have to get on with the job knowing when there are matters that should be shared with you."

"It's like having another teacher, a sort of multi-cultural school, it's really important that our chaplains understand the history of our children and their varied backgrounds, and believes that multiculturalism is a good thing. You can imagine that if you had a chaplain who didn't share those values - no matter how good the chaplain may be, it wouldn't be a good fit for the school."

"Some parents may have lingering memories of school not being the most pleasant place for them as a child. So to have somebody removed from the school hierarchy can provide them with a much more comfortable option. They don't have to go to 'the principal's office'."

"When you sit in the principal's chair you have more than enough to keep you occupied and challenged, especially when people are struggling emotionally with life challenges," said Neil. "They're so much going on in a school that sometimes you might not be able to give them as full a commitment as they need. Chaplains are a valuable resource. We're a Kids Hope school, and we see church folk committing to a child for up to five years - an hour a week with one child. You've got to appreciate that. Just as the mentors don't have to recruit for their church, but are in the school to help, the chaplain operates similarly. They are there to provide a supportive function.

"I suppose it was an affirmation of the chaplains we've worked with. We've had the time over the time period that some of those who have said 'no' to any chaplaincy involvement have a change of mind when unexpected challenges may arise," said Carolyn. "Our families have appreciated that although they may not need the chaplain for a long time, something may happen in their life - things might change," said Carolyn. "There may be a family separation, perhaps a death in the family, perhaps anxiety about a child moving to secondary school - there could be any number of things. There have been some families who have been surrounding boards for other families who are able to share the load by suggesting 'why don't you go and have a chat with the school chaplain?' You might benefit from a fresh perspective. Having another person to listen can be invaluable."