

Both Spiritan founders responded to the needs of the neediest within their respective eras. The Congregation continues this mission today. Desplaces, as the first founder, expressed pastoral care of his first students by, '*moving across the road*' to live in solidarity with this community of students. It is from this example we understand pastoral care as a central value in our Spiritan education mission. Spiritan Schools in Ireland were founded to form young people and the school community to serve and mirror this same mission.

The term "pastoral" was once used exclusively to describe the shepherd's role in caring for the flock on the pastures of Christian religious communities, giving us insight into its meaning in the context of education (*Best, 2014; Marland, 1974*). Pastoral care in schools has traditionally been associated with notions of help, advice, values development, and children's moral welfare. In the past, it has been viewed predominantly as a separate set of extra-curricular activities offered to students by school staff with particular support roles, or 'pastors' from affiliated churches or religious communities.

In 1974, visionary leader Michael Marland became the first author to use the term "pastoral" in the title of his seminal book (*see Best, 2014*). Before his pastoral work, many authors explained aspects of pastoral care, although in a way that was not as explicit or relevant to the understanding of pastoral care as described by Marland. In his book, Marland provided a working definition of pastoral care when he said it '*means looking after the total welfare of the pupil*', and he argued that '*pastoral care*' has 'a central educative purpose in itself, and therefore should not be seen as, 'a way of simply supporting the academic work' (Marland, 1974, pp. 8–9).

Although neglected for some time in schools, recent literature reviews have evidenced a renewed interest in pastoral care. In some cases, school leaders see pastoral care as a low priority or an afterthought.

Pastoral care in education refers to a whole-school strategy and operational approach to improving learner attendance, creating an atmosphere conducive to learning, and promoting tolerance, resilience, equity, and equal opportunities for all, while flowing from and promoting characteristic values. This approach to pastoral care should eliminate racism, inequality, discrimination, and other barriers to learning to foster and strengthen an ethos that enhances learner engagement and academic/personal excellence.

The quality of pastoral care affects the ethos and tone of the whole school. This creates an atmosphere where children feel safe knowing they are valued and encouraged in their learning, growth, and social and spiritual development. The board of trustees, the board of management, the chaplaincy team, and Senior and all staff, (*teaching and non-teaching*) have the responsibility to provide pastoral care.

Quality pastoral care focuses on the whole student (*personal, social, spiritual, and academic*) and involves all members of the school community as pastoral care providers. It actively engages the community in cohesive, responsive, comprehensive, and multilevel activities, including school-wide approaches, classroom or other group approaches, individual projects (*early intervention*), and casework.

What is pastoral care?

Each teacher is committed to the personal, and social development, education, and care of all students in the school. They are responsible for their own well-being and progress, and they make pastoral care a priority because they want to provide students with a safe and supportive environment where everyone can do their best.

Pastoral care is not a complementary or gratuitous practice. This is at the heart of every successful school with sensible, responsible, and focused policies centred on personal development and well-being, where happiness, personal and faith development, and well-being come first. Success is built on strong inclusive values.

But what does effective pastoral care look like? How can we meet the diverse needs of learners in schools, help them reach their full potential, and prepare them for the future?

How to recognize good pastoral care?

A school committed to high standards of pastoral care places this at the centre of its activities. This should be reflected in all aspects of school life, from ethics and the learning environment to how personal development is promoted in the curriculum and extracurricular activities. It should also be reflected in a friendly and respectful teacher-student relationship, how well the teacher understands the student, and the student is treated as an individual.

Dynamic Leaders

While every teacher has a pastoral responsibility, pastoral leadership is “absolutely essential” to identifying, understanding, and responding to school-specific challenges (*Sobel, 2019*), which means the healthy development of structures and pastoral systems. Management and administration of pastoral care are essential and require someone to keep an eye on the ball in terms of planning, resource allocation, monitoring, evaluation, encouragement, and promotion of an active, dynamic, appropriate, timely, and accessible pastoral care provision.

Effective service, therefore, begins with a coordinator with a 20/20 vision who can lead a professional team to provide high-level pastoral care with energy and insight. Premium pastoral care depends on relationships nurtured by clear and consistent communication in a nurturing culture, and a school is only as good as the relationships that leaders cultivate and work hard to build. A positive ethos and culture which promotes positive relationships and behaviour cannot be delivered without strong school leadership which is authoritative and distributive in nature.

Education

Pastoral leaders cannot be ‘saviours’ and ‘superheroes’ in silos but need the support of every colleague to create an environment that can help students thrive. But even surrounding oneself with an extraordinary team does not ensure good pastoral care without relevant and quality training. Schools face many issues and challenges, and they all need expert advice from experienced inclusion professionals on protection, bullying, mental health, working with outside agencies, managing difficult parents, etc.

Effective pastoral care must be fostered by effective formation to have an impact on human and social capital. This training is very unlikely to be delivered entirely in-house, so schools need to look outward, be strategic and selective, to find what works for them to fill identified gaps and needs.

Knowing what pastoral care is

Pastoral care is not an end in itself, but it is firmly anchored in the objectives, values, beliefs, and norms of the school. This is clearly articulated and staff from across the school community share a common and solid conceptual understanding of what it means to be pastoral.

Pastoral means different things in different contexts and there is no consistent definition. This may involve counselling, law enforcement, opening doors, mentoring, reconciliation, peer support, mentorship, and student development while promoting and supporting self-efficacy, healthy risk-taking, goal setting, negotiation, reflection, empowerment, and wellness networks. It can be all of this and more.

The key is that the most effective schools articulate what pastoral care means to them and translate this into a philosophy and practice of care at all levels so that a clear definition of what pastoral care is within and outside of school is important to the expectations of the school community.

This ensures that people are aware of the contribution that healthy pastoral care can make to school success and that they are aligned with school expectations. All consider pastoral care as an essential dimension to support learning.

Everywhere

Pastoral care is omnipresent, affects all aspects of school life, and must therefore be felt at all levels of the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment, school organization, ethos and environment, partnerships, and services.

Pastoral care is a living entity that builds community within the school, creates support systems and positive relationships among all members of the community, and promotes a strong ethic of mutual care and concern.

Pastoral care can only make a difference when professionals and parents work together, so it has strong inter-agency requirements, with rapid communication between key personnel, relevant organizations, and families.

Anticipation

Effective care is proactive and preventative, as schools provide a range of activities and support processes to anticipate "critical events" in a child's life, designed to avoid the need for reactive interventions and reduce them. This involves offering unique programs and a pastoral development program.

Distributed

A distributed model of pastoral care delivery where all staff knows what actions they need to take proactively and reactively will yield the best results.

When all staff members understand what is expected of them in their teaching role and they all sing the same song, care is consistent, fair, and reliable across the school, and this is felt by the students.

Never stands still

It is a constant process that is continually reviewing and updating an effective 'circle of care' so that it is responsive, appropriate, and current. Plan and administer school-wide pastoral reviews so that strengths and weaknesses are identified, and care is never compromised or diminished, with a constant focus on particularly disadvantaged learners.

Pastoral care is highly collaborative, and policies, procedures, and processes are a joint effort of regular communication, information sharing, and shared responsibility.

You may decide to form a pastoral working group of teachers, counsellors, a chaplaincy team, and other leaders to plan your professional development and focus on key areas of personal and social learning, professional teaching, and global citizenship.

Mutual Support

Building a culture of caring and mutual respect that facilitates learning requires employees who are fit and able to do the job. Teachers, chaplaincy teams, counsellors, learning support teachers, school nurses, and other front-line staff all need support networks to do their jobs effectively, and these networks can be a mix of internal networks and external. Caring for caregivers is always something about which pastoral leaders will be vigilant and proactive in cultivating and developing systems of self-protection/self-care so that the well-being of staff meets the well-being of the school population.

Finally...

The school takes pastoral care seriously because it defines its identity as an organization. Pastoral care does not happen randomly either – it takes a lot of time, energy, planning, and coordination. Daily work is carefully planned and executed when done effectively, with each student's best interests in mind to protect their well-being and foster their development.

An important characteristic of pastoral care is the extent to which staff understands the unique circumstances of students so they can learn effectively. Ultimately, the best care depends on the quality of relationships, strong partnerships, high expectations, and how staff responds to the needs of specific students and groups.