



Speech by

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YOUTH SUICIDE; CHAPLAINCY IN SCHOOLS

Mr FELDMAN (Caboolture—ONP) (6.42 p.m.): Today's youth face an ever-increasing battle to live normal, happy lives. Family breakdown is at the heart of this problem and has serious multiplier effects. At a time when they are vulnerable and trying to find their place in the world, the effects are even more severe. High school children specifically fit into this category. Apart from the usual teenage growing pains, add broken families, abusive households, responsibility for siblings, STDs, drugs, alcohol, lack of attention, increasing violence, changing economic climates with increased competition for jobs, growing unemployment and erosion of security, and it is little wonder that teenagers these days are more confused than ever. It is little wonder that suicide rates for teenagers are shamefully high.

In Queensland, according to the National Injury Surveillance Unit 1997 Australian Injury Prevention Bulletin Youth Suicide and Self-Injury Australia, the Queensland youth suicide rate is 17 per 100,000 for youth aged 15 to 24. Each week, 10 young Australians kill themselves and more than 1,000 make unsuccessful suicide bids. Federal Family Services Minister, Warwick Smith, last year said that young men's suicide rate was now four times higher than it was in 1950.

Around the time of the release of these alarming youth suicide figures, all sides of politics and psychological, medical and human behaviour experts at various times made mention of the necessity of aiming suicide prevention strategies at the overall population's psychological health and society's general wellbeing, rather than at small areas, minorities or high-risk groups. Change needs to be enacted at all levels of society, and Governments play a huge role in that change. Until Governments begin to realise, accept and change their policies and laws, family breakdown will continue to rip our communities apart and cause our children to take their own lives.

The family unit is the backbone of society, and it needs to be encouraged and supported in every way possible. Governments provide incentives to do just the opposite. Unfortunately, it is clear that Governments will not wake up and smell the coffee soon enough. Even One Nation's electoral success has not taught them that lesson. In the meantime, we need to input factors into this equation which will help kids to deal with their burdens. We need to provide help, with a long-term view to addressing the core of the problems—help that is supportive of traditional family values, maintaining the family unit, respect and responsibility, and good principles for living; help that not only addresses the current problems of today's youth but at the same time helps to replenish the moral fibre of tomorrow's society.

The provision of adequate funding so that high schools can employ full-time chaplains is the help to which I refer. Yes, guidance counsellors are provided in schools, but do they have such a focus on the larger societal picture and will they help children to deal with issues based on good Christian principles and in complete support of the traditional family unit? These are the values with which today's children need to learn to solve problems in their lives. Currently society tells them to solve problems through violence and death because everything is hopeless. They are the lost generation—Generation X. Chaplains can counteract this misery with solutions based on hope, forgiveness, love, responsibility, understanding, and strength and support from family.

On Monday night in the Parliament House function rooms, the Scripture Union hosted its annual dinner for Chaplaincy Week. Everyone there embraced the aims of the Scripture Unions for chaplaincy services in State schools, including the Minister for Environment, the Education Minister, the member for Hervey Bay, who hosted his own school chaplain, and several other members of this House. The aim of chaplaincy is to contribute to spiritual, ethical and religious support and assistance within the school community; religious education in the school; communication between all parts of the school community, religious groups and other appropriate organisations; and the credible portrayal of Christian faith—lifestyle and behaviour—in schools.

In practice, chaplains provide assistance to students, staff and parents for all manner of issues and are generally on call 24 hours a day. Their service is invaluable to the community. If this Government were serious about turning the tide of antisocial behaviour and youth suicide, it would be putting its money where its rhetoric is. What I am saying here is that, instead of Government bludging on the community and the P & Cs by letting them foot the bill and having to raise money by donation, church offerings, chook raffles and McDonald's even running "McChappy hours" to deal with these problems, it should be funding the provision of chaplains in our State schools so that our children have somewhere to turn and some sense of hope in an otherwise hopeless existence.

Governments have continually failed to give children the security they need in life by fighting societal and family breakdown. Until that is addressed, the least that Governments can do is to give our children some help to cope with the problems with which they are faced today. Let teachers get back to teaching, let chaplains, such as Jenny Dobbin at Caboolture State High School, Judy McAleeri at Bribie Island State High School, with the help of Government and the Scripture Union, help our children toward a better and more positive future. We need to support our chaplains. We really need to put a little bit of money where it should be—helping our children in schools.
