

Chaplains in Schools

By Frankie Bray

The issue of chaplains is one which seems to cause confusion amongst school communities. It is important to understand the difference between the National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program and the Christian Pastoral Support Worker (CPSW) Program (formerly called the Chaplaincy Program), and the relevance they have for your school.

Christian Pastoral Support Worker (CPSW) Program

The CPSW Program exists because of an agreement that was made between the Minister for Education and Child Development and the Heads of Churches State Schools Ministry Coordinating Group Inc (SMG). There is a contract between the Minister and the SMG which ensures that the Program complies with DECD policies, including child protection requirements.

The DECD Administrative Instructions and Guidelines (AIGs) Section 3 set out the guidelines for the CPSW Program, along with religious activities/seminars, and differentiates the Program from religious education. The Program does not fall under the guidelines concerning religious education because CPSWs do not teach and their role in schools does not include education.

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The term ‘chaplain’ is no longer used because it seemed to indicate that a CPSW had formal training or professional status, which they do not.

CPSWs are employed and funded by a local Christian group, and are accountable to that group. The principal is responsible for the operation of the Program within the school and must work in partnership with the local employing group (the Christian group) to negotiate and monitor the activities of the CPSW.

Before a CPSW program is initiated in any school, the principal must:

- Manage a consultation process that ensures the school community is informed about and supports the program within the school; and
- Seek the approval of the school Governing Council (with the support of the local community) for the establishment of a CPSW Program within the school.

The ongoing responsibilities of the principal in regard to the Program are to:

- Ensure any person volunteering within the program is a ‘fit and proper person’ for the role (including criminal history screening);
- Ensure the appointment and activities of the person working within the school’s CPSW program meet the requirements of the Education Department;

- Consult routinely with the Governing Council about the program, and report to the Governing Council on an annual basis regarding the outcomes of the program;

- Liaise routinely with the employing group (the local Christian group) about the program.

Nb: For a comprehensive overview, the AIGs Section 3: Student Matters can be found at www.saasso.asn.au.

Essentially, the decision on whether or not to bring a Christian Pastoral Support Worker into the school environment rests with the Governing Council and the local community. When considering the issue, it is also important to note that the existence of the CPSW Program (being of Christian faith) does not rule out the possibility of a similar program being developed with another faith group willing to offer a volunteer service in schools.

National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program

The National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program is a Federal program which began in 2007 and is currently funded until 2014. The intention of the Program is to ‘support schools and their communities that wish to establish school chaplaincy services or to enhance existing chaplaincy services’. Originally the program only funded ordained chaplains, and schools couldn’t receive funding for a youth worker unless they showed they had made efforts to find an ordained chaplain, and had failed. Since 2011, however, schools can now choose between a chaplain or a secular (non-faith based) student welfare worker.

The Program Guidelines state that both government and non-government schools, and their communities, can apply for up to \$20,000 per year (up to a maximum of \$60,000) to establish school chaplaincy services or improve existing chaplaincy services.

The nature of the services to be provided, including religious affiliation (or lack of) of the school chaplain, should be decided

by the local school and its community – following broad consultation. Students will not be obliged to participate, but both students and parents must be informed about the availability of the services, and the fact that they are voluntary.

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A SAASSO bulletin sent to members in March 2007 said that while the Guidelines clearly state that it must be a school decision whether to apply for a grant under the Program, and that it should only be done after comprehensive consultation with the community, it was unclear who exactly should be responsible for managing the consultation and application. Discussions with the chief executive of DECS at the time determined that given our system of local governance, it should be the Governing Council which makes that decision.

The current Guidelines state that “...school principals are eligible to submit an application for funding under the Program on behalf of their school community. The application must be endorsed by the school principal, parent body and/or school governing body, and the recognised religious institution or state/territory government approved chaplaincy service. If the application is not endorsed by all

those parties it will not be considered for funding”.

Schools that wish to apply for funding under the program need to work together through the school principal to prepare and submit their application through the

online application form. A Committee may be set up or a project leader appointed to help with the management of the process.

For more information visit www.dest.gov.au. ■

