

National School Chaplaincy Program 2011 Discussion Paper

By Frankie Bray

The National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP) was initiated in Australia in 2007. Since then, the Federal Government has provided \$207.8 million to run the program, and in 2010, Julia Gillard pledged a further \$222 million to continue the NSCP until 2014.

Currently there are 2,681 schools receiving funding nationally, capped at \$20,000 per school per year, to begin or continue providing chaplaincy services to the school community. The funding pledged in 2010 is expected to increase that number by 1,000 schools, with a focus on schools in disadvantaged, rural and remote areas. As it stands, the majority of chaplains are placed in metropolitan schools, regional areas employ 39%, and only 4% are placed in remote areas. Government schools receive 73% of the funding.

The Discussion Paper released in February of this year is based on consultation with a number of stakeholders from across Australia. These include representatives from the education, parent and chaplaincy communities of each state and territory.

Stakeholders made the following comments about the program.

- The number of schools who wish to apply for funding shows that there is still demand for the program. There is strong support for continuing and increasing funding for student support services in schools, and the need for adequate support of students social, emotional and spiritual development was acknowledged.
- Chaplains were noted as being a valuable addition to the school community in their capacity to support not only students, but teachers and families also. Their lack of teaching workload means that they are more available to provide support to the community, and are often seen as independent of the school, and therefore more approachable.

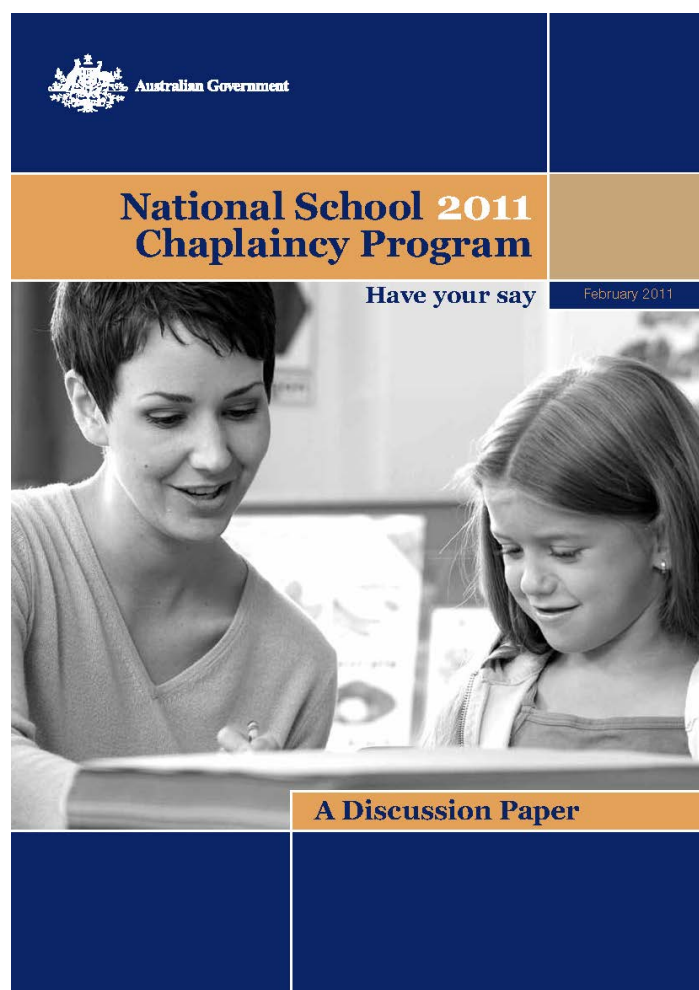
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- The flexibility of the program guidelines allows each school to determine which services would best suit their community, and enables chaplains to keep up with the ever changing and diverse nature of students needs.

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- The lack of state government funding for student welfare services in primary schools (in comparison to high schools) means that the presence of a chaplain gives these schools access to support which they might otherwise not get.

As well as feedback regarding the value of the program, some concerns were also expressed. The Parliamentary Inquiry into the Impact of Violence on Young Australians suggests that while



the NSCP has potential to provide students with spiritual guidance and care, it should not be considered a substitute for professional services, such as student counselling. It also recommended that chaplains be required to have training enabling them to identify students who require further assistance.

There are no national minimum qualifications or requirements currently in place for school chaplains, and the NSCP does not prescribe particular duties for them to perform. Rather, it provides a general description of the types of things they might do. While the flexibility of the program has been applauded, stakeholders are concerned about the quality of the service.

The Australian Psychological Society in particular expressed concern that chaplains may be undertaking activities beyond their capability. This is particularly concerning when considering that many of the issues confronting chaplains in schools are serious psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse and self-harm. Major chaplaincy service providers across the country currently mandate their own minimum requirements but do not have any common standards.

Another key criticism of the NSCP is the religious nature of the chaplaincy position. The program is considered by stakeholders to be inconsistent with the principle of religious neutrality by which the Australian Government generally operates. Current program guidelines only allow a school to appoint a secular pastoral care worker (one without religious affiliation) if they are unable to find a suitable *chaplain* – a clause which was added to the guidelines because some schools found themselves unable to find an agreeable chaplain, rather than in order to provide a non-religious alternative.

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The religious nature of the program raised concerns that it will cause difficulties for parents who want a secular education for their children. Although schools have the choice of introducing opt-in/out arrangements, stakeholders suggested that students

who opt-out might find themselves isolated from group activities.

The terminology used by the program also came under speculation. The Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils stated in their submission that the term ‘chaplain’ indicates a Christian standpoint, while a government funded position should not be of a particular religious denomination.

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Other stakeholders also hold reservations about the term, and in South Australia it has been replaced with the phrase ‘Christian Pastoral Support Worker’ by the Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS). The Australian Council of State Schools Organisations suggested that changing the terminology may encourage alternatives.

Some stakeholders expressed concerns that the faith of the chaplains employed under the NSCP does not adequately reflect the religious affiliations of the population of Australia. Of the 2,909 Chaplains funded under the program, 98.52% are of Christian faith. ‘Other’ religions such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism are represented by 1.47% of the program, and only 0.01% of the program funds secular pastoral care workers.

In order to improve the program for the future, the discussion paper proposes establishing a minimum qualification for school chaplains, namely a Certificate IV in Youth Work or similar, and a requirement for skills in early detection and referral processes for students who require professional assistance. The program guidelines will be informed by the results of the stakeholder consultations and the feedback from the release of the Discussion Paper. ■