

the atheist helper

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Dear Sir/Madam

Re: the National School Chaplaincy Program - have your say

We welcome the opportunity to provide this submission. We find it very difficult, however, to provide our views in the form of the template provided in the Discussion Paper, because the questions all presuppose support for the concept of government-funded religious chaplains in schools.

We are opposed in principle to government-funded school chaplains for the reasons outlined here. We do, however, still provide answers below to the template questions, as best we can.

Our organisation has been formed to help people traumatised by the effects of sects, cults and religions. We exist for the very reason that religious counsellors may be unable to provide the simple advice that victims may most need to hear: that based on reason and evidence, the beliefs of the various sects cults and religions are not actually true. Therefore, if they are unable to believe, there is nothing wrong with them.

Given that we have issues with religious counselling, we are opposed to the chaplaincy program as such. In addition, as a matter of principle, we are opposed to state funds being used for the advancement and promotion of religion. A correct reading of the Australian Constitution actually prohibits the establishment of religion in this way.

It is disappointing that the original secular principles on which our education systems were founded have been forgotten. The National Schools Chaplaincy Program should be abolished in its current form and transformed into a proper program providing counselling and social support in schools.

Before commenting on the discussion paper, we would like to clarify some issues so that our viewpoint may not be misconstrued.

Freedom of religion

The concept of secularism, which we support, is not opposed to freedom of religion, but on the contrary, seeks to enhance it by seeking to limit the ways in which governments impose particular religious beliefs on citizens, directly or indirectly. The chaplaincy program necessarily violates the principle of secularism because it promotes religion to students with government support and

endorsement. Freedom of religion would be enhanced if students were given ability to make rational choices, free from direct or indirect coercion by school officials.

Religion is not necessarily a public good

It is an unfortunate fact that in Australia all the activities of religious organisations are deemed charitable, whether this is justified or not. Thus all religious enterprises are deemed worthy of tax concessions and subsidies, without any evidence-based justification as to whether the activity is bona fide charitable or provides a public good. While some religious activities may be socially beneficial, there is overwhelming evidence, in terms of violence, coercion and rights deprivation, that there are adverse effects of religions, such that they cannot be deemed automatically to be a public good.

Comments on the Discussion Paper

The discussion paper refers to the fact that there is a ban on proselytising and evangelism under the current guidelines. However such a ban is in contradiction to the whole notion of the program, and indeed to the word “chaplain” itself. The very notion that a chaplain is provided in the program, rather than a youth worker or counsellor, is of itself promoting a religion, and therefore proselytising. The contradiction is further compounded by the fact that the stated aim of the chaplain-provider organisations is to preach their faith. This situation seems to us to be simply absurd.

The violation of secular principles of church-state separation is further affected by the fact that there is no practical attempt at impartiality between religions in the Chaplaincy Program. As stated in the paper, 98.5% of chaplains are Christian. Even the word “chaplain” itself is one that is usually associated with the Christian religion. An unfortunate consequence of the program, in a multicultural context, is that it will foster sectarianism, something that, over centuries, only secularism has been able to solve.

It is suggested also in the Discussion Paper, that an advantage of chaplains over other service providers, is that they can provide for the “spiritual development” of students. What is meant by this term? Can it be anything other than fostering a religious or supernatural belief? We can only assume it is a code used by those who wish to cultivate a religion while not admitting to doing so. Again, the contradiction with the ban on proselytising is obvious.

The current guidelines refer to the extremely limited possibility that secular “pastoral care workers” may be provided as an alternative to chaplains, but only if a real chaplain cannot be found. This is ironic, as the dictionary definition of the term “pastoral care” refers to the “duty of care of the clergy to the congregation”. Hence even in discussion of alternatives, we find loaded terms, biased in favour of a religious perception.

It is suggested in the paper that chaplains have an advantage in that they may be more approachable than counsellors or psychologists. This argument may not apply to youth workers. In reverse, it may well be that a youth worker could be more approachable than a chaplain. In any case, this is hardly an argument that chaplains should be provided at the expense of counsellors.

Indeed, we can certainly conceive of cases where the advice of a chaplain, in lieu of that of a psychologist, could actually be damaging to the individual student. In cases of mental illness, the most important feature of any counselling may be to seek to promote rational modes of thought. Unfortunately, it is quite fair to say that many types of religious belief survive on the absence of rational thought. It is for this very reason that we have set up our atheist counselling service.

Hence the advice of a chaplain may be quite counter-productive, if not damaging. This is particularly alarming, given that a survey, referred to in the Discussion Paper, “found that in the two weeks prior to their survey of approximately 1031 chaplains, 72 per cent of chaplains surveyed had dealt with students presenting with issues associated with mental health and depression, 50 per cent with alcohol and drug use and 44 per cent with self-harm and suicide.”

A further argument presented in the paper suggests that the services of chaplains are complementary to, rather than substitutes for, the services provided by youth workers and counsellors. This argument is disingenuous, as it is quite obvious that money saved from not funding chaplains could then be used to fund proper professional services. The fact that these services are desperately needed was highlighted by an inquiry, again referred to in the paper, which “urged state and territory education departments to recruit additional school counsellors and support increased funding for community-based youth counselling services.”

We accept that the Discussion Paper does also raise, to some degree, similar concerns to those we have expressed here. Overall, however, the Discussion Paper appears to have been purposefully designed to support perpetuation of the Chaplaincy Program, but with limited reform to its most egregious features.

Our recommendations

From the issues raised, it is clear that the reforms required are more far-reaching than what is proposed in the Discussion Paper. We submit that:

- The NSCP should be abolished and replaced with a program that supports the provision of non-religious social services in schools.
- The new program should have two separate components:
 - (i) the provision of qualified youth or social workers, with a Certificate IV-type qualification;
 - (ii) the provision of qualified counsellors with Bachelor level qualifications.
- Schools should have access to both types of service providers.

We trust that those with responsibility for making recommendations as a result of this review will be able to recognise the hypocrisy of religious lobbyists who clearly promote their religions while claiming that they do not. We trust also that the value of secularism will be recognised, as an alternative to the sectarianism that the Chaplaincy Program promotes, which may otherwise ultimately prove most damaging to the future harmony of Australian society.

We further elaborate on these issues in answer to the template questions below.

Yours sincerely,

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Question 1

Do you support the introduction of minimum qualifications for school chaplains?

Given that we do not support the provision of school chaplains, we cannot answer this question without qualification. School social workers or counsellors should have minimum qualifications. Chaplains as such, need not have such qualifications, but they should not be eligible for government support.

Question 2

Do you support the introduction of a minimum Certificate IV (Associate Diploma) in Youth Work or similar (e.g. pastoral care, community services)?

Yes, this should be the minimum requirement for youth workers in schools. A qualification in community services may be useful, but seems less relevant for school age children. We are not aware of any available qualification in “pastoral care”. If there is such a qualification, it seems likely that it would be associated with a religious group. We do not support the funding of youth workers or counsellors in schools who are designated as “chaplain”, or who purport to represent any religious group, or who seek to promote any form of religious “spiritual development”.

Question 3

What should be the minimum entry qualifications?

Certificate IV would be sufficient for youth workers. A higher qualification is required for counsellors and psychologists.

Question 4

What elements are most important for minimum qualifications for schools chaplains?

A belief in the doctrines of a particular religion or sect would presumably be relevant to being a chaplain. These beliefs are irrelevant to the provision of youth services or counselling. Qualifications in either youth work or counselling are relevant for the provision of government-supported school youth workers and counsellors.

Question 5

Are there any other comments you would like to make about the qualifications of chaplains?

As per the Australian Constitution, S116. “...no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.”

Question 6

Do you support the introduction of minimum standards for service providers under the program?

Yes, there should be minimum standards. Service providers should not be selected on the basis of any religious criteria.

Question 7

What elements are most important for minimum standards for service providers?

Qualifications and governance procedures that are that are appropriate for the sector, and which are independent of any religious organisation or group.

Question 8

Are there any other comments you would like to make about the minimum standards for service providers?

We would like to refer to Section 116 in full: “The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.”

Question 9

Do you support the current arrangements which require schools to attempt to employ a chaplain before being able to employ a secular pastoral care worker?

No. We support the employment of qualified youth workers and counsellors and oppose the government-funded employment of chaplains. If schools wish to provide a chaplain, this should be funded by the school, not the government. In any case, we believe the education system should be neutral in regard to religion, and that children should be free to form their own independent views on religion without being subject to any bias or coercion, explicit or implicit.

Question 10

Do you support modification of the program to give schools the choice of a non-faithbased support worker or youth worker?

Only non-faithbased support workers should be provided by the program.

Question 11

Are there any other comments you would like to make about the choice of support worker?

Schools should have a choice of a youth support worker, a psychological counsellor, or both.

Question 12

What models of administration would support innovative delivery under the program?

We expect that an expansion of properly based support services will enable the development of delivery programs and educational programs to meet the need.

Question 13

What innovative models of delivery would support rural, remote and disadvantaged schools to maximise the effectiveness of funding they could receive under the program?

We agree that cluster models and pooled funding models could be used.

Question 14

Are there any other comments you would like to make about innovative delivery models?

As above.

Question 15

Are there any other comments you would like to make about the program?

We refer to our main submission above and repeat our recommendations:

- The NSCP should be abolished and replaced with a program that supports the provision of non-religious social services in schools.
- The new program should have two separate components:
 - (iii) the provision of qualified youth or social workers, with a Certificate IV-type qualification;
 - (iv) the provision of qualified counsellors with Bachelor level qualifications.
- Schools should have access to both types of service providers.