

# Godsend or minefield?

Annie Facchinetti examines the pros and cons of the National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program

**W**e like to think of Australia as a multicultural nation, embracing, or at least tolerating, all races and cultures. Yet when the Howard Government established the National School Chaplaincy Program in 2007, it chose to take a decidedly non-inclusive stance. From the outset, the program had a strong religious bias that is at odds with the secular goals of public education, and despite Gillard government reforms, the predominantly Christian overtones of the initiative endure.

It is difficult to criticise a government for spending money on education and the wellbeing of students, and the intent of the Chaplaincy Program is highly admirable. The current National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program Guidelines (Australian Government, 2012) state that the scope of the program, “can include support and guidance about ethics, values, relationships and spirituality; the provision of pastoral care; and enhancing engagement with the broader

community.” With schools crying out for extra resources, especially in terms of student behaviour and emotional wellbeing, the advent of a program that would allow for additional staffing specifically for this domain should have been cause for great celebration.

However, as my father would say, “Mr Free died a long time ago” and when the program was first introduced it had a price that is difficult to reconcile in a public school setting: the chaplain had to be affiliated with a religion. The term “chaplain” is a loaded one. Oxford Dictionaries online define a chaplain as, “a member of the clergy attached to a private chapel, institution, ship, regiment, etc.” Choosing to make the program about chaplains rather than about counselling or student support staff was therefore a bemusing decision. While broadly applauding the aims of the initiative, peak bodies such as the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) expressed concern about its religious links. In a 2010 article, Executive Director Rupert Macgregor lamented that “...this debate was diverted into the sub-optimal alternative of the School Chaplaincy Program – in ways that were more motivated by ideological spin, expediency and political gamesmanship.” Admittedly, the media release by the then Prime Minister John Howard announcing the initiative in 2006 stated: “Chaplains will be expected to provide pastoral care, general religious and personal advice and comfort and support to all students and staff, irrespective of their religious beliefs.” But even with the best intentions, the ability of a religious-affiliated chaplain to provide advice that in no way promotes his or her religious beliefs is questionable.

Despite its links to religion, the National School Chaplaincy Program proved immediately popular with schools, so popular in fact that in 2010 a Labor Party election promise was not just to guarantee funding for existing schools until 2014, but also to extend the program to more schools. As the recent Gonski Report pointed out, our education system needs a huge cash injection to bring it up to world-class standards, and schools are not in a position to refuse funding, no matter how it is presented. In the face of mounting criticism, however, once in government the Gillard camp instigated a consultation process with key stakeholders about the program details.

As expected, the program’s religious ties featured heavily in the feedback. The Australian Psychological Society (APS), for example, raised objections about the lack of qualifications required by chaplains as well as the possible negative consequences of their religious affiliations. “The APS believes that it is questionable for the government to allow the practice of individuals, whose primary concern is to ‘make God’s Good News known to children, young people and families’, to counsel students with mental health issues. In contrast, school

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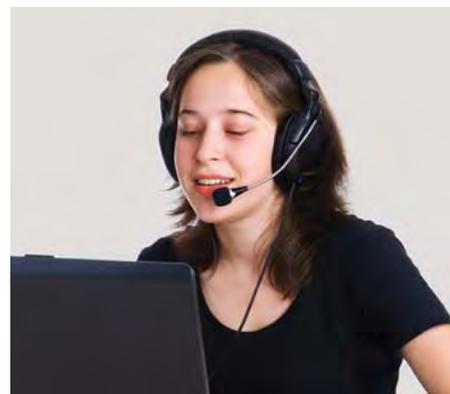
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*An old stone gate in Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire*

***These figures are a strong indication that many parents do not want their children exposed to the religious instruction on offer***

psychologists are trained to allow clients to find their own meaning, personal strengths and resources and to support individuals regardless of faith” (Thielking and Stokes, 2010).

The APS submission referred to the publicly stated aims of two of the main providers of chaplains in schools – ACCESS Ministries and the Scripture Union Australia – to support its contention that it would be next-to-impossible for chaplains to provide impartial advice. It takes only a cursory look at the ACCESS Ministries website to see that the line between Church and State is extremely blurred: “Victoria’s children and young people need to know God cares for them. They need positive role models and strong values. They need to develop skills and strategies to break the negative cycles in their lives. Young Victorians need CRE teachers and school chaplains, from *ACCESS Ministries*.” This is clear evidence that the mission of ACCESS Ministries chaplains is first and foremost a Christian one.

Yet the National School Chaplaincy Program Discussion Paper (Australian Government, 2011), which outlines the details of the initiative and the main issues associated with it, tells a very different story about Australian society. A comparison between the 2006 religious affiliation census data and program-funded chaplains revealed that while nearly 64 per cent of Australians identify themselves as Christians, more than 98 per cent of National School Chaplain Program chaplains

were from Christian faiths; are the needs of the 36 per cent of non-Christian students being adequately met by this program? At the other end of the spectrum, nearly 19 per cent of Australians classified themselves as having no religion, but only 0.01 per cent of chaplains were in the same category. In all fairness, at its inception the program guidelines required chaplains to be affiliated with a religion unless a suitable candidate could not be found which accounts to some degree for the low percentage of secular chaplains. It does not, however, account for the fact that, for example, 2.11 per cent of the population selected Buddhism as their religion on the census, but only 0.03 per cent of program chaplains were from the Buddhist faith. Statistics released from the 2011 Census reveal that the percentage of people identifying themselves as Christian has decreased while the percentage with no religion has increased, potentially making religious chaplains irrelevant or inappropriate for a growing number of students.

These statistics are echoed by figures supplied by Primary Ethics, the organisation responsible for the administration of ethics classes as an alternative to Special Religious Education lessons in NSW. According to Primary Ethics, around 25 per cent of children, or about 100,000 students, opt out of Special Religious Education/Scripture classes every week in NSW. Given that few or no schools do not offer at least one Christian option, and many schools have several religious alternatives available, these figures are a strong indication that many parents do not want their children exposed to the religious instruction on offer. It is not unreasonable to assume that they may also be uncomfortable with chaplains in their children’s schools.

The changes made by the Gillard Government based on the feedback received from stakeholders are certainly a step in the right direction. A number of concerns with the scheme were addressed by the new guidelines,

including the introduction of minimum qualifications and benchmark standards to better equip participants to identify the boundaries of their roles and refer students to counselling or other services when required. These issues were of particular concern to the APS, who described a report by the National School Chaplaincy Association that, “serves to confirm that schools are publicly admitting to the employment of chaplains for the provision of counselling services to psychologically vulnerable students in need of more specialised interventions.” (Thielking and Stokes, 2010). The program revisions should help address some of these problems.

In addition to re-branding the scheme as the National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program (NSCSWP), the amendments also allow schools the choice between a chaplain with religious ties and a secular social worker. Nevertheless, according to a media release from Minister for School Education Peter Garrett, of the 1000 new schools to be funded under the NSCSWP this year, 65 per cent have still opted for chaplains with the remaining 35 per cent choosing student welfare workers. While the new program guidelines require schools to consult with the community before deciding which of the options they will adopt, the level consultation required is scant. The National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program Guidelines (Australian Government, 2012) state: “At a minimum, there must be consultation with the school’s parent body or equivalent on an annual basis to review and confirm the support of the school community for the program.” To meet that requirement, schools need only consult their School Board or Parents and Citizens Association, which effectively cuts the opinions and needs of the broader community out of the conversation.

The opting out process is also contentious.

### ***The blurring of the line between church and state for those who choose public education is, however, a worrying trend***

The NSCWSP Guidelines state: “Students will not be obliged to participate in the program, and parents and students will be regularly informed by the school about the availability and the voluntary nature of the chaplaincy/student welfare services.” This appears not to have happened in all cases, but even where parents are informed of their rights to veto their child’s participation in the services of chaplains, this can prove to be logistically difficult. For example, in a school where the chaplain organises lunchtime sports competitions or works within classroom programs, it could be embarrassing or unworkable for a child or children to be constantly removed. This means that parents and students in many cases are not being given a genuine choice as to whether or not they wish to be involved with the chaplaincy program.

We are very fortunate in Australia that we have a diverse range of schools to choose from. Parents for whom education in a particular faith is important have access to schools that effectively meet that requirement and chaplains are an appropriate source of guidance in that setting. The blurring of the line between church and state for those who choose public education is, however, a worrying trend. While education in different faiths and beliefs to promote tolerance and understanding may have a place in government schools, indoctrination into one particular faith does not. According to an article in *The Age* (Topsfield and Harrison, 2011), the

federal Education Department had received “just 17 complaints about proselytising” by mid-2011; all of these complaints would have been avoided if we had a National Student Welfare Program, rather than a National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program. **ET**

### **Further reading**

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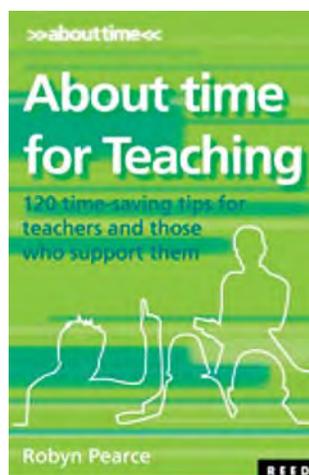
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