



# *Australian Education Union*

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NSCP Consultation  
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Employment and Workplace Relations  
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Dear NSCP Consultation,

## **Re: National School Chaplaincy Program Consultation**

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents approximately 185,000 teachers and education workers in Australia's public early childhood education centres, schools and TAFE Institutes. Whilst we welcome this consultation process on the National School Chaplaincy Program<sup>1</sup> (NSCP), we question its restrictive nature, particularly as the consultation questions are focussed on the future of the program, rather than the efficacy of the program in meeting the genuine social welfare needs of students in public schools.

The AEU believes that the NSCP undermines the secular nature of Australia's public education system. Furthermore it is an unacceptable way of delivering much needed social and emotional development and support programs to students in public schools.

### **The Secular Nature of Public Education**

A free, secular, universally accessible public education system is the key to a vibrant socially cohesive, democratic society. Public schools are open to all students regardless of their backgrounds, and it is essential that they remain secular. The architect of the Australian public education system, Sir Henry Parkes, described public education as offering an education to every child "*making no distinction of faith, asking no question about where a child was born, what may be his condition of life or what the position of his parents, but inviting all to sit side by side*". The NSCP undermines this central plank of the Australian public education system.

The AEU believes that taxpayer funds should not be used to employ chaplains/ministers or lay-preachers of any denomination in public schools as it undermines the separation of church and state.

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<sup>1</sup> This letter uses the generic terminology "chaplains", noting that the term is not used in South Australia where the name Christian Pastoral Support Worker is mandated.

## The Need for Qualified Counsellors and Educational Psychologists

There is an urgent need in Australia's public schools for greater numbers of qualified counsellors and educational psychologists in order to meet the needs of students, reduce high student to counsellor ratios, and to ensure that state and territory education departments meet their duty of care obligations to students.

The following information, provided to the AEU in a submission to the schools' funding review by a principal of a public school in Victoria highlights the failure of the NSCP. In contrast to the NSCP, the principal states that:

*“There is a very strong need for much stronger welfare support at our school. This would involve counsellors, psychologists, specialist welfare/learning support teachers and allied support staff, and welfare/behaviour programs to meet students' needs. This year we have had suicide, death, trauma, family break up, violence and homelessness affect the children at our school in very significant ways. This impacts on their learning and on their behaviour and consequently feelings of safety and connectedness.”*

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) has recommended a school psychologist/counsellor ratio of 1 to 500, yet in New South Wales, the school counsellor to student ratio is approximately 1 to 1,000. It is the AEU's view that the resources spent on the NSCP would be more effective if allocated to increasing the number of qualified educational psychologists and counsellors. This would contribute to manageable caseloads, individual attention for those children who require it, and professional collaboration with teachers, parents and the broader school community to implement positive strategies in developing social and emotional competence.

## Evidence Based Policy

Information cited as 'independent evidence' of the effectiveness of the NSCP is questionable. The report *The Effectiveness of Chaplaincy as provided by the National School Chaplaincy Association to Government Schools in Australia*<sup>2</sup> was commissioned by the National School Chaplaincy Association – the network of Christian chaplaincy organisations paid by the Government to run the program. These organisations stand to lose millions of dollars from the Government if the program is closed. According to the DEEWR website, approximately \$8.2 million of the program's funding allocation has been 'used to fund increased infrastructure requirements of the major service providers.'<sup>3</sup> In addition, one of the authors of this so-called independent study has not declared their affiliation to the Christian Research Association, nor the fact that they are an ordained Anglican minister.

Further to this, as mentioned in the introductory statement, the AEU questions the nature of this DEEWR consultation process. The opening statement on the NSCP consultation website is framed in a positive manner, rather than an objective manner:

*“The national consultation process is considering the **achievements and effectiveness** of the National School Chaplaincy Program, its relationship with other student support activities, and canvassing stakeholder views in relation to **future chaplaincy and pastoral care services.**” (our bold)*

<sup>2</sup> From [http://www.suqld.org.au/\\_sys/\\_data/downloads/chaplaincyeffectiveness.pdf](http://www.suqld.org.au/_sys/_data/downloads/chaplaincyeffectiveness.pdf) (accessed 10.03.11)

<sup>3</sup> From <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NationalSchoolChaplaincyProgram/Documents/Table.pdf> (accessed 10.03.11)

The AEU fails to see how a process of ‘considering the achievements and effectiveness of the program’ will provide the Government with the evidence required to construct and implement its oft-spoken mantra of ‘evidence-based policy.’ In contrast, there is a multitude of independent, controlled research which assesses the impact of school counsellors and psychologists on students’ education, with overwhelmingly positive findings.

The AEU believes that the Government should have proceeded to review the program along the lines described by the Member for Parramatta, Julie Owens, in parliamentary debate on 19 October 2009, where she said:

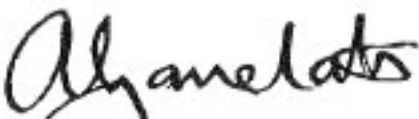
*“Money for education is not unlimited and the Rudd government, like all governments, will need to make choices. The process that leads to that choice is taking place now. The program will be reviewed and its effectiveness assessed. There is no plan for a further round at this time but the program will be reviewed and, as appropriate, the government will make a decision on whether the National Schools Chaplaincy Program delivers in a priority area and whether it is the most effective mechanism to deliver services to schools.”<sup>4</sup>*

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the AEU’s concerns with the NSCP can be summarised as follows. Firstly, the program undermines the secular nature of public education in Australia and the separation of church and state. Secondly, the program is an inappropriate use of taxpayer funds which would be better used to increase the number of qualified educational psychologists and/or school counsellors to provide much needed social and emotional support to students. Finally, the nature of this consultation and the ‘evidence’ cited by the National School Chaplaincy Program, which stands to lose millions of dollars in increased infrastructure funding from the Government, is questionable.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information or clarification of these issues.

Yours sincerely,



Angelo Gavrielatos  
**Federal President**

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<sup>4</sup> From <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/displayPrint.w3p;db=CHAMBER;id=chamber%2Fhansardr%2F2009-10-19%2F0210;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansardr%2F2009-10-19%2F0121%22> (accessed 11.03.11)