

Chaplaincy program and problems for Special Religious Education (Scripture) in NSW schools

Background

In the early 1990s, a number of full-time and part-time teachers of special religious education used the title “chaplain” to describe their various roles within their school. The Inter-church Commission on Religious Education in Schools (ICCOREIS) and other providers became concerned about this development because of the confusion of roles between being teachers of special religious education and performing other duties under the supervision of the principal namely chaplaincy. Concerned that this might eventually undermine special religious education (SRE) in schools, a meeting was held with the Director-General who agreed that the term “chaplain” should not be used in schools to distinguish these positions and a more descriptive title of their role, like SRE teacher should be used. A meeting was held with the existing chaplains and, by agreement, they relinquished this title.

Australian Government Program

The introduction of the Australian Government program for chaplaincy positions in schools was not embraced or supported by the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) because the Australian government did not offer any administrative funds. Individual schools were permitted to contract directly with the Australian Government to establish these positions. Critical to this development was that the chaplains under this program were to be non-sectarian, that is, showing no favour to any one religious persuasion thereby precluding them from promoting a particular religious persuasion. With a focus on student welfare they were not to be engaged in religious activities. However, most positions were part time and to be fully employed many of these positions went to teachers of special religious education where religious groups partly funded the positions so that these chaplains could also organise and, in many cases, teach special religious education. This confusion has led to protests in some communities and a High Court challenge to the Australian Government’s right to fund such positions. The court has now ruled that this form of funding is unconstitutional. The Australian government has signalled that it will only fund chaplaincy positions and not welfare positions which have been an alternative use of these funds in some schools. It is now most probably that the Australian government will continue to fund these programs through the states and they will take an administrative fee before distributing funds.

Confusion of programs

The chaplaincy program remains popular in schools and in most schools has been well accepted. Difficulties have arisen in some states, where chaplains have pushed the boundaries of their role by involving themselves in specifically

Christian activities and their promotion. This has often occurred because the chaplain works in this program for a few days a week and is involved in other duties of a religious nature in the school for the remainder of the week. Confusion about role and funding sources makes for some community objections to religious activities. In particular, the confusion with any SRE roles is likely to undermine the strong SRE program in NSW schools. This was already evident in a Sydney Morning Herald article 25 July 2014 which indicated that the Sydney Anglican Church did not want chaplains and that in the longer term wanted an ethics and world view subject to replace SRE. A subsequent denial by the church was not printed in the SMH but the damage to public perceptions of SRE had been done. If not enough damage, the SMH provided a manipulative piece on 28 July which further undermined public confidence in the SRE program and chaplaincy. Both programs were lumped together as the authors pursued their secular (non-religious) view of public education extolling the virtues of the special ethics course that is now an alternative to SRE in schools and bemoaning anything religious even though, in the case of SRE, it is entirely optional.

New developments

Current developments in schools indicate that some schools may well establish chaplaincy positions outside the Australian Government program by securing community funds and possibly using some of their own funds. If the NSW Department is to allow chaplaincy positions to develop in schools which are not part of the Australian government program then there are a number of issues for both the Department and the providers of SRE.

- The duties of the chaplain within the school and their association with special religious education
- The sources of funding (is the school contributing?)
- The persuasion(s) they represent and its relationship with other persuasions
- The community perception and reactions to the duties of these positions

The simplest way to protect both the Department and the providers of special religious education is to only allow schools to establish chaplaincy positions that are part of the Australian government program. This will prevent issues of favouritism or bias to any one religious persuasion because these positions are non-sectarian.

So that the state cannot be accused of providing funds for any particular persuasion, it will also be necessary to make clear to schools that school funds are not to be used to fund or partly fund any additional hours to existing Australian government funded chaplains where the duties include anything of a religious nature, especially SRE.

Should the DEC allow chaplaincy type positions outside the provisions of the Australian Government program, then a suitable title that describes the major part of their duties should be selected by the local school, but not “chaplain”. These titles could include “welfare officer”, “special religious education teacher”, “student support teacher” but avoid existing specialist positions like “school counsellor” and “community liaison officer”.

Suggested change to existing DEC Religious education implementation procedures : Add the following paragraph: School are not to establish a position of chaplain other than through the Australian Government program. Where similar positions are established outside the Australian Government program schools are to select a title that best describes the major part of their work, but not “chaplain”. School funds are not to be allocated to any position that contains duties related to particular religious persuasions

Yes, this is a complicated matter but the protection of SRE should be the priority. No chaplaincy program is worth pursuing that threatens the provision of SRE in NSW.

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