

Guidelines for Special Religious Education (SRE) and School Chaplaincy

Introduction

In 2006 the Australian Federal Government introduced funding for the provision of chaplaincy services in schools (K-12). To achieve the maximum benefit for the students and their families in the government schools of NSW, it is essential that all stakeholders are aware of the distinct yet complementary contribution to be made by the school chaplain and the SRE teachers from the approved religious providers working in their school community.

Guidelines

Chaplaincy

Chaplaincy is essentially a pastoral counselling service that may be available to a particular school community dependant on the availability of funding and other resources, such as appropriately trained and qualified personnel. The key tasks of the school chaplain are outlined in published guideline material (www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NationalSchoolChaplaincyProgram/Pages/home.aspx) and will include the following activities:

- Assisting school counsellors and staff in the delivery of school welfare services;
- Supporting students to explore their spirituality;
- Providing guidance about spiritual, values and ethical matters; and
- Facilitating access to helping agencies in the community, both religious-based and secular.

Special Religious Education

Chaplaincy services are not limited to the above and in this context it is necessary to reiterate the unique legislative position of SRE in NSW government schools. This position is stated in the Education Act 1990, Section 32:

Secular instruction

30. *In government schools, the education is to consist of strictly non-sectarian and secular instruction. The words secular instruction are to be taken to include general religious education as distinct from dogmatic or polemical theology.*

Special religious education

32. (1) *In every government school, time is to be allowed for the religious education of children of any religious persuasion, but the total number of hours so allowed in a year is not to exceed, for each child, the number of school weeks in the year.*

(2) *The religious education to be given to children of any religious persuasion is to be given by a member of the clergy or other religious teacher of that persuasion authorised by the religious body to which the member of the clergy or other religious teacher belongs.*

(3) *The religious education to be given is in every case to be the religious education authorised by the religious body to which the member of the clergy or other religious teacher belongs.*

(4) *The times at which religious education is to be given to children of a particular religious persuasion are to be fixed by agreement between the principal of the school and the local member of the clergy or other religious teacher of that persuasion.*

(5) *Children attending a religious education class are to be separated from other children at the school while the class is held.*

(6) *If the relevant member of the clergy or religious teacher fails to attend the school at the appointed time, the children are to be appropriately cared for at the school during the period set aside for religious education.*

Objection to religious education

33. *No child at a government school is to be required to receive any general religious education or special religious education if the parent of the child objects to the child's receiving that education.*

The following statement comes from the Rawlinson Report:

Objectives for Special Religious Education

6.58 *SRE should provide opportunities for learners:*

- a) *to develop an ability to interpret religious data within the traditions of their particular faith*
- b) *to gain an appreciation of specific religious interpretations of issues and problems in which committed people apply their faith to life*
- c) *to translate their learning about their faith into active expression in a worshipping community*
- d) *to encounter, in a peer group learning context, religious teaching given from a position of faith and commitment, by a person explicitly associated with the religious community*
- e) *to be aware of the availability of personal and group counselling in the area of religious need, as occasion demands.*

Rawlinson, R. W. (1980). *Religion in Education in NSW Government Schools*. Sydney: Government Printer.

The implementation of SRE has been supported by subsequent publications from the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), most recently restated in the *Religious Education Policy* (www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/religion/index.htm).

Roles and Interactions

Both school chaplains and SRE teachers explore spirituality and provide guidance about religious interpretations, values and ethical matters. Good communication is essential between the two, as both work within the school system and will be working with the same children. They will need to be able to speak freely with the principal and with each other.

The following table outlines some of the differences between chaplains and SRE teachers:

Chaplains	SRE Teachers
Work with students, staff, parents and outside welfare agencies	Work predominantly with students
Welfare based	Educationally based
Work outside the classroom situation, and in special programmes	Work in the classroom situation, giving lessons/seminars
Accountable to the principal	Accountable to religious provider(s)
Appointed by the Project Sponsor* on behalf of the school community	Appointed by religious provider(s)

* See the chaplaincy guidelines published by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Can chaplains teach SRE?
Yes, provided they are duly authorised by an approved provider to teach children of that religious persuasion. While teaching SRE they are bound to follow the SRE Guidelines (see the *ICCOREIS SRE Handbook*).
2. Can SRE teachers provide professional counselling?
No. Such matters ought to be referred to the school counsellor or principal.
3. Can SRE teachers provide spiritual guidance?
Yes.
4. Can chaplains provide professional counselling?
No, unless they are recognised by the DET as a provider of professional counselling services.
5. What is the relationship of the chaplain to the school's student welfare team?
The chaplain will be encouraged by the school principal to work with the school welfare team.
6. Can SRE teachers provide support to students and their families?
This may be an appropriate response to certain situations, and ought to be done under the authority of the approved provider in consultation with the school principal.
7. Do chaplains have to be ordained?
No. However, the DEEWR National School Chaplaincy Guidelines state that they must be recognised in one of the following ways: formal ordination; commissioning; recognised qualifications; or endorsement by a recognised or accepted religious institution or a state/territory government approved chaplaincy service.
8. Can chaplains belong to a religious group or organisation that is not an approved provider?
Yes. Such chaplains would not be able to teach SRE unless they are also authorised to do so by one or more of the approved providers.

Conclusion

With the presence of chaplains in government schools in NSW there is an opportunity for SRE to embrace its truly educational nature in an environment of pastoral care that is being provided from a faith based perspective.