

Chaplains in NSW Government Schools and Special Religious Education (SRE)

Introduction

In 2006 the Australian Federal Government introduced funding for the provision of chaplaincy services in schools (K-12) under the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP). In October 2011 the program was expanded to include secular welfare workers, and renamed the National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program (NSCSWP).

Chaplains and student welfare workers

For the purposes of the NSCSWP school chaplains and student welfare workers are people who:

- Are recognised by the school community and the appropriate governing authority for the school as having the skills and experience to deliver school chaplaincy to the school community.
- Meet the minimum qualification requirements.

In addition the school chaplain is

- Recognised through formal ordination, commissioning, recognised religious qualifications or endorsement by a recognised or accepted religious institution or a state/territory government approved chaplaincy service.

NSCSWP and SRE

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/student welfare worker and the SRE teachers from the approved religious providers working in their school community.

Guidelines

Chaplaincy

Chaplaincy is essentially a pastoral care 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 the Guidelines:

<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NSCSWP/Pages/Expansion.aspx> including the following activities:

- Assisting school counsellors and staff in the delivery of student resilience and wellbeing services.
- Providing students, families and staff with support and appropriate referrals in difficult situations such as during times of grief or personal or emotional challenges
- Supporting students to explore their spirituality
- Providing services with a spiritual contents (excluding religious education)
- Organising one-on-one or group sessions with students, parents, staff and other members of the school community

Special Religious Education

The unique legislative position of SRE in NSW government schools 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 Communities (DEC – formerly the 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 may be working with the same children.

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

Chaplains/Student welfare workers	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 programs	Work in the classroom situation, giving lessons/seminars
Accountable to the principal	Accountable to religious provider/s
Appointed by various organisations	Appointed by religious provider/s

The NSCSWP guidelines provide a Code of Conduct for school chaplains/student welfare workers. The Guidelines also state the services that are not included: see Section 3.1.2:

Services provided during Program funded hours must not include:

- *providing religious education in their schools. The decision on whether non Program funded religious education is delivered by the same person who is employed with Program funding is to be determined by schools and Funding Recipients. However, to avoid potential role confusion, best practice recommends that these roles be conducted by different persons. Where this is not a school preference/not possible, schools need to ensure they take all necessary steps to delineate the roles, including on the school website as per Section 6.5*
- *attempting to convert students to a religion or set of beliefs through proselytising/evangelising. School chaplains/student welfare workers must not*
 - *coerce students to attend activities that have religious content/focus*
 - *ask or encourage students to proselytise/evangelise within the school.*
 - *deliver activities/services that promote a particular view or religious belief without prior approval and consents as per Sections 3.1 and 5.2*
 - *put students in a position of feeling manipulated or intruded upon by intense persuasive conversation...*
- *Providing professional support services, for example counselling or legal or medical advice, unless:*
 - *Appropriately qualified to do so*
 - *Consistent with relevant state policies and procedures...*
- *Performing religious services/rites (such as worship or prayer during school assembly etc), without the appropriate prior consents as Sections 3.1 and 5.2*

Frequently Asked Questions

May chaplains teach SRE?

Yes, provided they are duly authorised by an approved provider. While teaching SRE they are bound to follow the SRE Guidelines (see the *ICCOREIS SRE Handbook*).

Best practice recommends that these roles be conducted by different persons. Where this is not a school preference/not possible, schools need to ensure they take all necessary steps to delineate the roles (NSCSWP Guidelines Section 3.1.2).

May SRE teachers provide counselling?

No, but they need to be aware of the availability of counselling. They ought to speak with teachers and parents if they are concerned about a child.

May SRE teachers provide support to students and their families?

This may be an appropriate response in certain situations, and ought to be done under the authority of the approved provider, in cooperation with the school/classroom teacher/principal.

Do chaplains have to be ordained?

Even though the school may refer to all workers by the generic term “chaplains” there are two distinct workers under the NSCSWP: school chaplains and student welfare workers. Chaplains are recognised through commissioning, recognised religious qualifications or endorsement by a recognised or accepted religious institution or a state government approved chaplaincy service and may or may not be ordained. They must meet minimum qualification requirements.

Student welfare workers are secular workers who must also meet minimum qualification requirements.

Can chaplains belong to a religious group or organisation that is not an approved provider?

Yes, but not if they teach SRE as well.

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.