

Chaplains again?

You never know what might happen when a few politicians have a good idea, especially if they are Christian or sympathetic to Christianity. At first glance the idea of the Australian Government funding chaplaincy positions in schools looks attractive and many churches could see an immediate burden (both responsibility and financial) being lifted from their shoulders. But further investigation is needed, especially when you find out that Chaplaincy positions can not be established in NSW public schools. *Following discussions between existing chaplains and their schools, agreement has been reached that the position of chaplain should be deleted. Schools are not to establish chaplaincy positions.* (DG 95.4095)

Before canvassing the merits or otherwise of the latest interest in chaplaincy positions in schools, it worth considering what led to the above policy in NSW. The key opposition to chaplaincy came from the providers of special religious education (SRE). The Christian churches and the other providers opposed chaplaincy because of the potential threat it posed to the operation of special religious education (scripture) in schools.

At the time (1995), a number of churches in local areas had combined to place an SRE teacher into a local high school who would take classes across the timetable. Because they were at the school up to five days a week, schools treated them as staff and provided them with a desk in a staffroom and their duties within the school soon expanded to include involvement with students in sport and other extra-curricula activities and because they had good relationships with students, these teacher often were involve in the school's student welfare work including counselling. In some cases the "other duties" grew and the SRE role diminished.

To further complicate matters, a group was established to support these teachers and to look at expending chaplaincy into more schools. The aim was to encourage churches to provide funds for chaplaincy positions in schools. SRE teaching would be a lever to get into wider ministries in schools.

The SRE providers became concerned when the Department reported that it had received legal advice about chaplaincy positions in schools. The position was that chaplains could be appointed, but that they could not do anything religious. This position put them immediately in conflict with SRE which is persuasion specific teaching and involves religious activity including worship and prayer. Another troubling point was that chaplains could be from any religion and that schools could therefore have multiple chaplains.

The providers of SRE saw this as a major long term threat to SRE provision and through the Anglican Education Commission sought discussions with the Director-General. It was agreed that the position of chaplain should be abolished and meetings were held with the existing chaplains and their principals. It was agreed that the chaplains would give up the title and a memo DG 95.4095 was issued to say that chaplaincy positions could not be established in NSW government schools.

In addition the memo drew a clear distinction between the SRE role and any other duties an SRE teacher might have in a particular school. *When schools use teachers of SRE in roles outside the provisions of SRE, such teachers are deemed to be volunteers and have the same rights and responsibilities as all volunteers.* (DG 95.4095) This

statement clearly places these other duties directly under the responsibility of the principal and not the SRE policy.

Since 1995, the number of SRE teachers working across the timetable of secondary schools has increased and there could be as many as ninety. Some also operate in voluntary capacities attending to other duties negotiated with and responsible to the principal, but they are not chaplains and no chaplaincy positions have been established.

The new push for chaplaincy positions is coming from other states and territories where the provision of SRE is not as strong and chaplaincy positions in school have emerged as an alternative to providing SRE. Western Australia and Victoria have been two states where these suggestions seem to have support and where Australian Government assistance is sought to fund existing chaplaincy positions in schools.

The Australian Government could use this initiative to drive a wedge between schools and their Labor state governments. The funding of these positions directly to schools or to outside organizations may not be a preferred option of state governments. How government schools could take advantage of these funds is difficult to see in the case of NSW. Perhaps some religious organizations or para-church groups could take up the offer and provide paid SRE teachers in schools who with the support of principals might work in other capacities. However, it is unlikely that the NSW Department will abandon its policy on this matter, especially when it is so strongly supported by the providers of SRE of all persuasions.

It is also difficult to believe that some of the people behind this initiative, who are strongly in favour of getting more Christian people into public schools, have considered the prospect of chaplains from other religions and what role they might play in schools. Some Christians don't mind promoting Christianity from such positions, but get a little concerned when other religions do the same. And what about the principals of schools faced with multiple chaplains wanting to work in their school.

The Colony of NSW legislation has informed the legislation of the other states. It is not clear what the legislation of each state might allow for chaplains. But if the answer is, "nothing religious", then why would you want a chaplain?

This matter is sure to grab more media attention and should be of interest to all members of TCFNSW.

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