

More About Chaplains

The Australian Government Chaplaincy in Schools Programme has received a mixed reception.

In NSW, the Catholic Sydney Archdiocese has indicated that it believes that the program is unsuitable for their schools. One of the factors driving this decision is probably the description of the duties that doesn't include any religious activities. This could also be a problem for other religion-based schools.

It should be remembered that Special Religious Education (SRE) does not operate as effectively in other states and territories with as clear a distinction between general religious education and SRE as occurs in NSW. This proposal for chaplains is a way of propping-up flagging programs of church involvement in schools in other states. Should NSW benefit then well and good, but I am not sure how many NSW schools will seek involvement.

The NSW Department of Education and Training has yet to issue a memorandum to principals about this matter although one has been signalled. For public schools the issues focus on the term "chaplain" and who the employer will be.

The current DET policy position is that NSW public schools are not to appoint chaplains. This comes from a 1995 memorandum supported by the providers of SRE who saw these positions in schools as a possible threat to the provision of SRE. However, the Australian Government proposal does not insist on the title "chaplain" being used, a possible way out.

Secondly, there are plenty of "project sponsors" lining up to assist schools to make an application, including existing boards, supporting full and part time SRE teachers. School P & Cs can also, under the Australian Government program, be employers, but not schools.

The program can apply to any NSW school and consultation with the school community would seem to be the essential ingredient if schools are to make an application. Everybody knowing what is going on will be important if widespread support is to be achieved.

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