



Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia  
79 Lindsay Street  
Perth WA 6000  
T: 08 9227 5440  
Rural & Remote: 1800 670 231  
F: 08 9328 7446

NSCP Consultation  
Australian Government Department  
of Education, Employment and  
Workplace Relations  
GPO Box 9880  
Adelaide SA 5001

To whom it may concern,

### **Submission to the National School Chaplaincy Program Consultation**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission into the Department's inquiry into the NSCP. YACWA is glad to be given the opportunity to contribute to the evolution of a program that has the potential to greatly improve the lives of young Australian students.

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) is the peak non-government youth organisation in Western Australia with a membership of over 300 youth service organisations, community organisations, academics, individuals and most importantly young people themselves. Established in 1980, YACWA has worked tirelessly for 30 years to deliver high-level representation and advocacy for the Western Australian youth sector and young people.

Our role is to:

- Act as a lobbying group for the non-government youth sector and Western Australian young people aged 12-25
- Provide information and support to the non-government youth sector
- Work to promote fair and positive outcomes for young people in our community
- Promote equity, equality, access and participation for young people in Western Australia
- Advocate to all levels of government on the best interests of Western Australia's young people
- Encourage the active participation of young people in identifying and dealing with issues that are important to them
- Improve youth services by exchanging ideas, information, skills and resources
- Provide a strong, united and informed voice capable of effectively advocating for the non-government youth sector and the young people with whom they work

## Religious nature of the programme and role of the Chaplains

While recognising that many Chaplains do very good work, and without going into a discussion of the program's constitutionality, YACWA has a fundamental concern with the idea of religiously motivated individuals giving advice to young people on sensitive issues. It is absolutely paramount that when a child or young person approaches an adult with sensitive questions of the most personal nature they are given neutral, unbiased and constructive guidance that does nothing more than to encourage the young person to reach their full potential as a human being and be comfortable with who they are. An example of the conflict of having religious figures providing advice to often confused and vulnerable youth was no more evident than in a 2009 Senate Inquiry into the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill. The largest chaplain service provider in NSW, GenR8 Ministries, submitted to the inquiry and stated that they "utterly reject and repudiate" the assumption that homosexuality "is acceptable sexual behaviour"<sup>1</sup>. The mere notion that an organisation with such an anachronistic view is sending chaplains into schools to spread this message of inequality and intolerance is troubling at best and dangerous at worst. It is not merely contrary to the supposed principles of the Australian Government's religious neutrality but it is exposing Australia's young people to organisations who see their primary role as the evangelism of children and not pastoral care:

*"Working with the churches, Scripture Union aims:*

- a. To make God's Good News known to children, young people and families..."<sup>2</sup>*

*"Genr8 NSW Scripture Teachers, Chaplains and Scripture Boards strengthen their ministry in NSW schools so that many more young lives will be transformed through the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup>*

*"Our approach is urgent because children will, by their nature and because of the world in which they live, turn away from God unless they are evangelised and nurtured."<sup>4</sup>*

We also take issue with the perception that chaplains and counsellors, are interchangeable. They are not the same thing. In a 2009 research paper funded by ACCESS Ministries, a Victorian based chaplain service provider, it was stated that "the majority of students and parents"<sup>5</sup> were not sure if the role of a chaplain was in any way different to the role of a counselor. A chaplain employed by GenR8 Ministries in NSW described his role as a chaplain in a primary school by stating that he presents "the good news of Jesus and lets the pupils figure it out". While the pastoral care aspects of the roles may be similar it is unsettling to think that a young person will potentially approach one of these individuals with questions of a sensitive nature and be given religious or spiritual guidance when in fact they are in need of advice from a qualified counselor. Failing to provide adequate and suitable advice to young people can result in a raft of long term developmental issues that have the potential to effect a youth for their entire life. These include but are of course not limited to:

- Mental illness
- Inability to form relationships

---

<sup>1</sup> Inquiry into the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2009, *GenR8 Schools Ministries, NSW*

<sup>2</sup> Scripture Union Australia (SUA),

[http://www.scriptureunion.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=86](http://www.scriptureunion.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=86)

<sup>3</sup> GenR8 Ministries.org, <http://www.genr8ministries.org/about>

<sup>4</sup> Scripture Union International, *Serving Children Policy Paper- 2005* p6

<sup>5</sup> The Value of Chaplains in Victorian Schools, 'An independent research report into the views of students, parents, chaplains and school principals', ACCESS Ministries 2009 p.5

- Alcohol dependence and drug use
- Homelessness
- Self-harm and suicide

Research indicates that 75% of mental health disorders begin before a person reaches the age of 25 and 70% of young people who experience mental health problems never seek help<sup>6</sup>. This is why it is absolutely critical that qualified youth workers, psychologists or counsellors, not religious advisors, are available in every school to increase the likelihood that a young person will receive some help when they need it most.

### *Qualifications*

In 2009 the National School Chaplaincy Association (NSCA) released *The Effectiveness of Chaplaincy as Provided by the NSCA to Government Schools in Australia* (Hughes and Sims) report. The report was full of praise for the program however offered little to no empirical evidence to substantiate many of its claims. The fact that the authors of the report were affiliated with the Christian Research Association offers insight into its bias and questionable findings. However what was interesting was that the report confirmed what had previously only been assumed that chaplains were dealing with issues for which they were either not qualified or seriously under qualified to deal with. According to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Frequently asked questions about the NSCP a chaplain is not permitted to “provide services for which they are not qualified, for example, counselling services or psychological assessment...” Statistics contained in DEEWR’s 2011 discussion paper on the National School Chaplaincy Program, indicated that Chaplains were doing exactly this with one Chaplain even stating, in an ACCESS Ministries report published in 2009, that “at the moment ...I’ve got two Grade 5 kids on suicide watch”. The Hughes and Sims report into the effectiveness of the NSCP included a survey of over 1000 Chaplains that found that in the two weeks prior to the survey:

- 95% of chaplains reported dealing with behaviour management issues such as anger;
- 92% with bullying and harassment;
- 92% with peer relationships and loneliness;
- 91% with student-family relationship issues;
- 85% with sense of purpose and self esteem;
- 81% with grief and loss;
- 77% with community involvement and social inclusion;
- 76% with spirituality and ‘big picture’ issues of life;
- 72% with mental health and depression;
- 50% with alcohol and drug abuse and
- 44% with self harm and suicide

These statistics coupled with the fact that the survey also revealed that less than half of the Chaplains surveyed had experience dealing with children and young people and that a mere 14% had any professional experience in counselling make it incredibly concerning that students aren’t being given the assistance of more qualified individuals.

---

<sup>6</sup> Headspace Australia’s National Youth Mental Health Foundation,  
<http://www.headspace.org.au/home/information/research/>

There is a significant gap in qualification between Chaplain service providers ranging from no minimum standard (GenR8 Ministries) to a Bachelor degree in Theology, Youth Work or Education (ACCESS Ministries). It is almost beyond comprehension that a ministry is able to place an individual in a school who is not merely under qualified but has no relevant qualifications for dealing with at risk or vulnerable children. We take the position that the Department must set a minimum standard of qualification for Chaplains. The most desirable qualification is a Bachelor Degree in Youth Work however a Certificate IV in Youth Studies is a satisfactory minimum.

### *Secular support services*

In its current form the program only provides for a secular youth worker, pastoral care advisor or counsellor provided the school has undertaken an extensive search for a religious Chaplain and has failed to find an appropriate candidate. This must change. Before detailing why secular youth workers are far more desirable than often unqualified religious advisors a brief reference to demography has to be made. According to 2006 ABS Census data, statistics included in the Department's discussion paper, almost 30% of respondents identified as either having no religion or an unstated religion and yet only 0.01% of funded Chaplains identified as secular pastoral care workers. Furthermore while making up less than 64% of Australia's population almost 99% of funded Chaplains are Christian. The average Australian school community is comprised of families from an amazingly diverse range of ethnicities and religions and yet the program forces school communities to agree on one religion for all students. Not only does this promote and institutionalise religious inequality in schools it encourages the evangelism of young secular children or children from minority religions by authority figures with a Christian agenda.

While many Chaplains do very good work in schools, it is impossible to deny the fact that a religious agenda can make it difficult for Chaplains to deal with certain issues. A youth worker is however trained to deal "...with the whole young person promoting emotional literacy and anti-oppressive practice.....youth work skills [are] central to engaging with young people, to the personal, emotional and social development of young people."<sup>7</sup> In addition to this youth workers are also qualified to assist in a young person's spiritual development without the encumbrance of a religious agenda. Secular youth workers, having a minimum standard of qualification, are trained to develop relationships with young people, to understand them on an individual level and help them develop specific solutions to problems individual young people may have. Placing unqualified, or under qualified, Chaplains in schools belittles and ignores the level of training and knowledge an individual, youth worker, counsellor or psychologist, must have when attempting to assist young people.

Secular youth workers have but one concern, the care and well being of the children they have been employed to care for. Not only are secular youth workers more appropriate pastoral care advisors because of their mandatory minimum standard of qualification but they can fulfil a more unifying role than a potentially divisive religious figure. Parents seeking to give their children a secular education would find it difficult to reconcile the notion of religious guidance counsellors in Australia's public schools with Australia's supposed religious neutrality. Although the program's guidelines state that a Chaplain is not permitted "to impose any religious beliefs or persuade an individual toward a particular set of religious beliefs"<sup>8</sup> It is worrying that the program doesn't have sufficient or effective safeguards

---

<sup>7</sup> Youth Work in Schools: an Investigation of Youth Work, as a Process of Informal Learning, in Formal Setting, Dr Tony Morgan, Pat Morgan and Brian O'Kelly, Page 9

<sup>8</sup> DEEWR, *NSCP Program Guidelines*

[http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NationalSchoolChaplaincyProgram/Documents/nscp\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NationalSchoolChaplaincyProgram/Documents/nscp_guidelines.pdf)

against proselytizing or evangelism. Furthermore a Chaplain is however permitted to facilitate access to “helping agencies in the community...religious-based”<sup>9</sup>. This appears to allow for an indirect form of evangelism.

### **Evaluation and measurement of program outcomes**

YACWA is strongly concerned by the fact that there is limited to no quantitative data available that allows outside groups to evaluate the program’s impact. While recognising the difficulty in measuring and reporting on the general well-being of students it is clear that:

- 1) The objectives of the program are far too general in nature consequently making it almost impossible to evaluate the program’s ultimate success or failure. The Department’s explanation of a Chaplain as an individual who is employed to provide “general personal and religious advice, comfort and support to all students and staff”<sup>10</sup> needs to be amended to better reflect the duties that Chaplains are employed to undertake. This is not only necessary for the benefit of reporting and evaluation but would also give parents and guardians a greater understanding of the role of the Chaplain.
- 2) The collection of data isn’t widespread and is shared over two levels of government. It would make more sense practically if a standard mechanism for data collection could be developed.
- 3) The data that is available is overwhelmingly anecdotal in nature and doesn’t provide any valuable insight into the effectiveness of the program.
- 4) There has been no research into the effectiveness and appropriateness of secular youth workers, counsellors or potentially school nurses as desirable alternatives to religious Chaplains.

### **Recommendations**

- 1) School communities should be able to employ a secular youth worker without the need to first search for a religious chaplain.
- 2) Assuming the process of employing religious chaplains continues all chaplains should be required to have a Certificate IV in Youth Studies.
- 3) A more effective and efficient means of reporting needs to be developed to better facilitate evaluation of the program. This would require mandatory minimum reporting standards.
- 4) Assuming Chaplains still aren’t required to obtain a Certificate IV in Youth Studies the department needs to develop safeguards to prevent Chaplains giving advice on issues for which they are not qualified. The department must also establish a policy of mandatory professional referral in instances when a chaplain identifies an issue on which they are unqualified to advise.

YACWA recognises the fact that many Chaplains do very good work in schools around the country. We are however concerned by the fact that a great many of these Chaplains are giving advice beyond their qualifications and are dealing with issues that should be the responsibility of professionals. If the NSCP was established as a program that aimed only to nurture students’ spiritual development and provide them with casual pastoral care then Chaplains would be an acceptable presence in schools. However this is not the case. Chaplains are performing the tasks of youth workers and counsellors, tasks most Chaplains are unqualified to undertake. The department needs to understand that a youth worker has a

---

<sup>9</sup> DEEWR, *NSCP Guidelines*

[http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NationalSchoolChaplaincyProgram/Documents/nscp\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NationalSchoolChaplaincyProgram/Documents/nscp_guidelines.pdf)

very specific set of skills to assist young people in not merely their spiritual development but more importantly their emotional and mental wellbeing. An unqualified Chaplain cannot and should not be permitted to perform the role of a youth worker. We owe a duty to our young people that when they approach an adult with a problem they are given the best, most thoughtful, well informed advice and guidance they could possibly receive. Anything less would be a violation of our duty of care. It is for this reason that we believe youth workers are a more desirable and more appropriate presence in our schools.