



Australian Council of State School Organisations Limited

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

SUBMISSION TO THE

INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL SCHOOL CHAPLAINCY PROGRAM

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*One voice for every child in government education*

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The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the one voice for every child in public education in Australia. As an organisation, ACSSO welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Independent evaluation of the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP).

ACSSO is committed to access, equality, equity of outcomes, excellence, and participatory democracy.

Australia is a multicultural and democratic society in which every individual has the right to achieve personal fulfillment while respecting the rights of others and developing cooperative relationships essential to living in society.

ACSSO believes that education is integral to both the development of the individual and the development of society and it both reflects and exercises an influence on the values, attitudes, and practices of society.

The aim of education is to help the individual to develop fully as a person and as a member of society. A high-quality education, therefore, is in the interests of a society as a whole and is the right of every individual. Education is a lifelong process which neither begins nor ends with formal schooling or formal education, although the role of the school is crucial in the development of individuals, and through them society.

Whether or not you consider Australia to be a secular nation, Section 116 of the Australian Constitution provides that:

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*THE COMMONWEALTH SHALL NOT MAKE ANY LAW FOR ESTABLISHING ANY RELIGION, OR FOR IMPOSING ANY RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE, OR FOR PROHIBITING THE FREE EXERCISE OF ANY RELIGION, AND NO RELIGIOUS TEST SHALL BE REQUIRED AS A QUALIFICATION FOR ANY OFFICE OR PUBLIC TRUST UNDER THE COMMONWEALTH.*

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ACSSO acknowledges that Australia still has a portion of the population who identify as having a faith, although the number of people identifying as having no religion is significant and growing exponentially.

The line between faith-based chaplains acting to support students in the provision of general care and proselytising is too easily crossed.

Supporting every young person to succeed in education requires strong collaboration and communication between schools and families and communities.

It is ACSSO's position that funding provided for the NSCP would deliver greater health, well-being and educational benefits for Australia's youth and their families if the funding was redirected into the support for school psychologists or workers in the area of mental health and wellbeing with the appropriate training. ACSSO is of the strong belief that any provision of religious based workers in schools should be at the expense of the faith-based organisation. These organisations have been set

up as charities to do such work for decades without any additional funding until the introduction of funding for chaplaincy.

School psychologists would be uniquely qualified members of school teams that could support students' readiness to learn and teachers' ability to teach. They would be able to apply expertise in mental health, learning, and behaviours that interrupt the student's ability to engage, to help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviourally, and emotionally. School psychologists would partner with families, teachers, school administrators, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that would strengthen connections between home, school, and the community.

During the COVID-19 crisis it was existing school psychologists and counsellors who provided a critical (however very limited) service supporting students with learning and emotional needs. We acknowledge that during COVID-19 restrictions, they had to change the way they provided this service. However, it's important we learn from our experiences during COVID, to ensure we continue to support students' learning and emotional wellbeing during possible future crises, including pandemics.

It is our understanding that one in seven Australian young people are affected by a mental disorder, with recent reports finding that Australian youth were five times less likely to seek help at times of psychological distress.

Our National Survey, in February 2022, told us that over 80% of parents were concerned for their child's mental health and well-being following the last two years. It is acknowledged that many young people have disengaged from school during this period, and many have been traumatised through the events of the pandemic, bushfires and floods. The need is critical, but getting the right support is essential – the training in trauma response and working with families under this kind of stress is paramount.

We know that mental illness in young people can affect core areas such as education, achievement, relationships, and occupational success, and the prevalence of mental health concerns has increased among children and adolescents due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with mental health services struggling to keep up.

ACSSO acknowledges that schools play a key role, in partnership with families and specialist providers, in supporting student wellbeing and mental health.

Schools have a genuine need, to have on site, qualified mental health professionals, social workers, counsellors, or youth workers to work in roles to support students.

Schools need these professionals to help students with a range of difficulties – anxiety, trauma, grief, difficult outside of school situations, and the pressures of modern life – so that they are supported to participate in their learning, they feel ready to learn and are able to articulate any challenges they have.

Government schools across Australia serve diverse communities and employing secular welfare officers and means that people of all faiths (or none) can feel comfortable accessing professional supports provided through their school.

Over the years, ACSSO has strongly supported principals in seeking the resources they need, reinforced by evidence, which demonstrates the enormous value added by professional qualified guidance and counselling capacity – and of having dedicated qualified community liaison people working and building strong complementary supportive partnerships with the parents and families of each community.

Therefore, ACSSO's position has consistently been that the essential need is for the provision of professionally trained, qualified and experienced staff that can provide advice, counselling and support, with appropriate access to further specialised professional support and intervention resources as required. This together with an appropriately resourced, qualified, and dedicated Community Liaison Officer building supportive and sustainable partnership linkages with parents and families. This dual need is most critically present and of greatest potential benefit in those schools of particular need or disadvantage – including those in rural, regional, and remote communities across the country.

What has been a major concern for ACSSO in regard the NSCP is that only a small number of school chaplains are qualified in counselling or psychology and those that have still have theology at their key platform. There is clear evidence that school chaplains are engaging in duties for which they are not qualified or don't carry the breadth of understanding. Issues that chaplains are engaged in working in areas such as children's anger issues, grief and loss, bullying, peer pressure and self-esteem as well as self-harm and suicide are something to which their training is limited. These issues require expert help and schools, and students are in need of this.

Also, of concern is to hear reported that on a number of occasions since the establishment of the NSCP, the Australian Psychological Society has been contacted by members who are concerned about chaplains who have been employed in schools to provide mental health counselling to students. This has occurred either instead of or in replacement of school psychologists.

At a time of ever-increasing social pressures and mental health issues on young people, what is needed, is an enhancement of professional school counselling services. The increase in the incidence of mental health issues, in diagnosis of autism and other student disability diagnoses as well as the parental choice for the inclusion of students with confirmed disabilities into mainstream classes impacts on the required additional support needed for staff, students and families in classes. The parental choice for inclusion of students with disability diagnoses into mainstream classes supported the notion that a qualified person was required.

*ACSSO strongly believes the money for the National School Chaplaincy Program would be better utilised on additional personnel who could work in the area of well-being and mental health, such as psychologists and counsellors, to achieve a more manageable caseload to actively support students and families in need. More importantly every government school should be afforded personnel to cover these roles.*