School chaplains: time to look at the evidence

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The debate about the federal government’s school chaplaincy program has suffered from a lack of hard evidence, argue Monica Thielking and David MacKenzie

Federal schools minister Peter Garrett (above) has stressed that the chaplaincy program should not be seen by religious organisations as an opportunity to recruit schoolchildren.

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8.30 am: A sixteen-year-old student arrives at school in tears, clearly distressed and unable to concentrate on her lessons. Last night, after years of fighting, her parents announced that they were splitting up. Her father will move into a flat in a suburb over an hour away and she has been given the choice of whether or not she would like to spend weekends with him – away from her mum and her peer group. The “talk” didn’t go well, and after a heated argument with her parents she stayed overnight at a friend’s house. Her home-room teacher mentally goes through his day’s schedule. Four classes before lunch and then the debating team in the afternoon. An appointment with the school counsellor could take weeks…

WHETHER it’s a result of a family break-up, school bullying or any of the other problems that affect school-aged Australians, many students come to school with more on their mind than how to remember the periodic table for an upcoming science test. With measures to keep students at school until Year 12 firmly established in government policy, it’s long been agreed that student support services need to be strengthened.

In 2006 the federal government announced a $90 million pastoral care scheme to give school students improved access to a supportive adult and alleviate the burden that welfare issues place on teachers’ time. Announcing the National School Chaplaincy Program, or NSCP, Prime Minister John Howard referred to the chaplaincy services provided in the armed forces as a model. All government and non-government primary and secondary schools would have access to the program, which would be staffed by religiously trained staff with the aim of “assisting students in exploring their spirituality; providing guidance on religious, values and ethical matters; helping school counsellors and staff in offering welfare services and support in cases of bereavement, family breakdown or other crisis and loss situations.” The initiative had its critics, but generally the education sector welcomed the additional resources.

As it stands, a school can receive up to $60,000 over three years to employ a school chaplain. To date, about 2700 schools have taken up the opportunity, with over 28 per cent of public schools in Australia receiving NSCP funding. The largest uptake has occurred in Queensland, where 782 schools have received funding for a school chaplain, resulting in 80 per cent of high schools having what is familiarly known in that state as a “chappy.”

Most school chaplains in government schools are employed through a state provider of chaplaincy services. Nearly all providers are Christian organisations and members of a peak body called the National School Chaplaincy Association; they include ACCESS Ministries (Victoria), GenR8 (New South Wales), the Scripture Union (the ACT, Queensland and Tasmania), Schools Ministry Group (South Australia), and YouthCARE (Western Australia). Each of these providers has set its own minimum training requirements for endorsement as a chaplain.

It’s important not to confuse the chaplaincy program with religious instruction classes, an allocation of curriculum time to religious organisations. In Victoria, for example, these classes are mainly staffed by volunteer instructors.
from various churches, and in Queensland they are taught by teachers. The two programs are not entirely distinct, though, because in some states religious instruction classes may be managed by the same organisations that train and employ school chaplains, and in some cases the same individuals participate in both programs.

In many schools, the appointed chaplain has been accepted and appreciated by the school community; in others, the program has been questioned on a range of grounds. Within the broader community, opinion is divided about whether the NSCP scheme should continue or be closed down or modified. Reflecting basic differences of opinion about religion and school education, the controversy surrounding the NSCP seems likely to continue.

THE controversy has received extensive media attention this year. While there have been arguments about the effectiveness of the program for student welfare, and about the investment of resources compared to the funding of other support services, most of the disagreement seems to relate to the role of chaplains in schools and the blurring of the line between religious activity and welfare support.

Concern about “religious proselytising” has been fuelled by coverage of a speech by the chief executive of ACCESS Ministries, Canon Dr Evonne Paddison, which revealed that the organisation sees the NSCP as a recruiting ground for children and young people. One of Dr Paddison’s proclamations included a statement that “in Australia we have a God-given open door to children and young people with the Gospel, our federal and state governments allow us to take the Christian faith into our schools and share it. We need to go and make disciples.” In response, the responsible federal minister, Peter Garrett, reiterated that the NSCP should not be used for this purpose and announced an immediate investigation; the Age reports that the inquiry found no evidence that ACCESS Ministries members had been seeking to convert students. The former NSW premier, Bob Carr, went much further, calling for the NSCP to be abolished. Radio National’s Background Briefing found that most state and territory representatives of the Australian Council of State School Organisations reject the NSCP because of the evidence of school chaplains proselytising their religion to students. In particular, the NSW ACSSO representative alleged that the program is now being used for widespread Christian evangelism.

While the federal government has made it clear that chaplains mustn’t use their position to proselytise, questions remain about whether or not school chaplains are able to provide non-judgemental, value-free and inclusive support services for students. The fact that over 98 per cent of chaplains employed under the scheme are Christian has raised concerns that the program does not reflect Australia’s pluralistic society. What is at issue is not so much whether particular chaplains are effective or not, but whether the program violates a central tenet of secular education.

Bob Carr isn’t the only prominent figure arguing against the program. Former High Court judge, Justice Michael Kirby, has proclaimed that the NSCP is “offensive to the historical Australian principles of education” and asked that chaplains be ejected from government schools. Angelo Gavrielatos, federal president of the Australian Education Union, believes that the NSCP is “misguided and wrong” and says the resources could be better used to increase schools’ access to secular student welfare services. The executive director of the peak body for the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, Dr Bryan Cowling, believes that the NSCP is being repeatedly misused, putting well-established religious education classes at risk by mixing faith with welfare: “if it’s a welfare position and a welfare role, why not just call it that rather than call it a chaplain… I just think it’s a clumsy way to do things.” Later this year the NSCP will be challenged in the High Court on the grounds that it breaches the constitutional separation of church and state, particularly Section 116 of the Australian Constitution, by funding a program that promotes religion and requires government bodies to use a person’s religious beliefs as a qualification for employment.

All this means that the government is feeling the heat over a scheme that was not only introduced by its Coalition predecessor but will also soon be the subject of a significant legal challenge and much more media scrutiny. Any rollback or containment is likely to be welcomed by those who are uneasy about or opposed to the NSCP. However, and perhaps more significantly, it would also result in a wave of disapproval, mostly from the influential Australian Christian Lobby and its associated organisations, but also from some schools who have benefited from the program. Therein lies the political dilemma for the government.
CHAPLAINS must not provide a service for which they aren’t qualified, according to the federal government. But this guideline floats freely in an environment where there are no agreed national minimum standards for the training of school chaplains nor any concrete advice on what “pastoral care” actually means; and more broadly, currently there are no national standards for providing student support in Australian schools.

Various definitions of the role of school chaplaincy are in circulation. Some suggest that school chaplains should only take on matters of a “spiritual” nature, while others extend the role to include activities that are traditionally the domain of a school counsellor or student welfare coordinator. The National School Chaplaincy Association asserts that “school chaplains are in the prevention and rescue business. They’re helping students find a better way to deal with issues ranging from family breakdown and loneliness to drug abuse, depression and suicide. They provide a listening ear and a caring presence for kids in crisis… and those who just need a friend. All have a passion to improve the lives of young people.”

There is certainly evidence of chaplains doing just that. A study by Philip Hughes and Margaret Sims, published by the Social Research Centre at Edith Cowan University in 2009, found that 72 per cent of the chaplains surveyed indicated that they deal with student mental health and depression issues, while one of the activities they did least was refer students to appropriate professionals. Good intentions undoubtedly lie behind the association’s statement, but is dealing with “drug abuse, depression and suicide” really within the realm of the program or within the expertise of most school chaplains? These are some of the questions being asked about the implementation of the program.

The student welfare needs in schools and the amount of time teachers and principals must allocate to meeting those needs undoubtedly help explain the uptake of chaplains under the program. Mental disorders (particularly anxiety and depression) account for over half of the total youth disease burden in the community; principals say that these conditions are having a significant impact on schools and that they are not adequately resourced to deal with them. An appointment with a mental health professional who can listen, assess and intervene is not always readily available, so teachers often must shoulder the burden until such help is available.

Yet, when dealing with young people experiencing mental health and other serious personal issues, there is a need to manage the risks carefully. Whoever provides the “listening ear” should be acutely aware of his or her professional boundaries and limitations and be able to provide a level of appropriate support. That person needs to be able to distinguish between issues requiring mental health expertise and those less serious issues that can be handled without specialised mental health training. Unfortunately, there is evidence that NSCP school chaplains don’t have that capacity.

At the far end of the spectrum – dealing with vulnerable teenagers who may be self-harming or fantasising about suicide – a lack of training in risk assessment can be a matter of a life and death. So, when ACCESS Ministries asserts that chaplains are there “for kids at-risk in your school community,” it inevitably raises questions about training and professional expertise. Should chaplains be required to hold professional qualifications on par with school counsellors or guidance officers or other welfare personnel in schools? Or should the role of chaplains be more tightly regulated so that they are not dealing with risky welfare issues?

The Northern Territory ombudsman, Carolyn Richards, has argued strongly that chaplains should not be dealing with mental health issues. Richards has written a scathing report about how the NSCP has been implemented in five territory schools, in which she reports that chaplains are providing counselling services and conducting psychological therapy – for which they are not qualified – with the result that some students have not received the psychological care they needed. She was particularly critical of chaplains conducting one-on-one “pastoral care” sessions for students experiencing issues such as domestic violence, abuse, behavioural problems and “physical symptoms” on the grounds that students may be exposed to increased risk by being supported inappropriately by unqualified individuals. Overall, Richards was highly critical about the way the program has been designed and its lack of regulation. Following on from that inquiry, the office of the Commonwealth ombudsman commenced its own investigation of the NSCP, with a report to be released on 26 July this year.

One other concern frequently raised in the media is the significant allocation of “taxpayer dollars” for the NSCP. The estimated total amount of Commonwealth funding committed to the NSCP since 2006 is reported to be $437
million. A significant portion of this funding – $165 million – has gone directly to “fund increased infrastructure requirements of the major service providers.” In the lead-up to last year’s federal election, after a meeting with Jim Wallace from the Australian Christian Lobby, Julia Gillard pledged a further $222 million, announcing that the program would be extended to boost the number of chaplains in schools by about 1000. Some commentators speculated that the funding was a pitch to Christian voters designed as a counter to the prime minister’s declared atheism.

It’s appropriate to question the effectiveness – and cost-effectiveness – of any government program. Responding to this question, both the National School Chaplaincy Association and the government have referred to the study by Philip Hughes and Margaret Sims. In fact, the association approached Hughes to review the effectiveness of its chaplaincy program in those schools where the chaplain was part of the association. The study surveyed principals (688 out of the 1626 invited, or 42 per cent) and chaplains (1031 out of 1396, or 74 per cent). Chaplains in NSW schools were not included because the Department of Education was “concerned that the study does not appear to be designed as a fair evaluation of the national program, since alternative means of achieving program objectives are not considered.” The report concluded that “chaplaincy is a unique service that is proving to be of great value to students, staff, parents and their schools.” It found no cases where chaplains “pushed their own beliefs” and reported that all the case-study feedback was positive, except for one parent – altogether an extraordinarily positive finding given the feedback from other reports about the program.

The validity of this report has been strongly challenged by former academic and NSW Greens MP, John Kaye, who described the study as “deeply flawed,” methodologically unsound and lacking independence. Kaye points out that the lead author Philip Hughes was employed four days a week by the church-funded Christian Research Association and that this affiliation was not disclosed in the report, leaving his conflict of interest position unaddressed. A more important criticism was that “the data and analysis presented in the report do not justify the conclusion it reaches” – specifically, that “it’s a huge leap of faith from principals welcoming an additional pair of hands focused on student welfare to the conclusion that these benefits could only be delivered by a Christian chaplain” – and that the study failed to examine the possibility that what chaplains might contribute is just as well or better done by other welfare professionals. This is the question of opportunity cost, where it could be argued that the significant funding for the program might be more effective if spent differently. Kaye’s final comment was that the report “should be viewed as a piece of advocacy not as decent and scholarly research.”

The fact is that the provision of support services for students in Australian schools has never been subjected to serious research and evaluation, and any analysis is made more difficult by the fact that the various states and territories deploy somewhat different models. In a number of jurisdictions, however, we do know that resources flowing to “student welfare” or “student well-being” have been increased over the years. And there is broad bipartisan acceptance that if most students remain in schools through to Year 12 then schools become institutions that must deal with issues beyond the classroom.

The National Schools Chaplaincy Program seems destined to cast a shadow over bipartisan support for welfare programs in schools. A significant amount of federal government funding goes to the NSCP for what is essentially a student welfare program. But the NSCP has never been reviewed in the context of other student welfare and pastoral care programs already provided in schools, including the work of student welfare coordinators, youth workers or school psychologists. It can’t simply be asserted that school chaplains offer a unique service or that the work of school chaplains in general has a significant positive effect on student well-being; these claims need to be tested.

Legal challenges and secular critics aside, some supporters of the NSCP believe that children should be given the opportunity to develop their “spirituality” at schools. Adolescent mental health expert Michael Carr-Gregg, who spoke at an ACCESS Ministries fundraiser, has referred to young people as “spiritual anorexics” and as having “holes in their souls.” Carr-Gregg’s catchy comments are consistent with some studies that have revealed significant positive effects of spiritual beliefs on well-being. But what are “spiritual beliefs” exactly? And how important is the need for “spiritual counselling” in schools? Interestingly, Hughes and Sims found that “not many principals nor chaplains mentioned the spiritual aspect of chaplaincy as the most important contribution the chaplains brought.” Such topics are certainly worth investigating, but the question still remains whether a school chaplain or a government-funded chaplaincy program is the most appropriate way to help adolescents with
existential and spiritual issues.

The claims and counter-claims in the debate should be tested against some real evidence. The public controversy about chaplaincy has created division and encouraged political expediency in programs to support students in schools. Policy decisions are being based on hunches, leaps of faith or religious or anti-religious prejudice. It's time to step back, take the politics and controversy out of the debate, subject all the extant questions to research and begin to assemble the evidence base for student support in schools. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd promised evidence-based policy; no area of policy would benefit more from this approach.

What matters most are the interests and needs of the girl who arrived at school distressed and unable to concentrate because her parents had just announced their separation, or the boy who is not attending because he has been the victim of bullying, or the thousands of students who are in some way or another disadvantaged, traumatised, experiencing mental health issues, struggling with school or feeling alone. NSCP or no NSCP, the key question is simple: how to ensure that young people receive the most appropriate support and guidance they need to become successful, healthy and happy young adults, with the skills and confidence to meaningfully participate in Australian society? •