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via email engagement@dandolo.com.au

National School Chaplaincy Program

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is pleased to provide a submission to the independent evaluation of the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP).

The NCEC welcomes the aim of the independent evaluation to assess the NSCP's effectiveness in supporting the wellbeing of school students and the broader school community.

This submission has been developed in consultation with state and territory Catholic Education Commissions and other Catholic school authorities across Australia.

While the online consultation platform acknowledges that the evaluation has a short timeframe, Catholic Education strongly suggests that the available two week submission period is too brief to adequately consult the 3000 school communities in which the NSCP operates each year.

Background

The NCEC is the peak body for Catholic education in Australia and is responsible for the national coordination and representation of Catholic schools and school authorities.

Working collaboratively with state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, the NCEC advocates through effective liaison with the federal, state and territory governments, and key national education bodies. Our role is to ensure the needs of Catholic schools are served through funding, legislation, and policy.

Our work is to foster a thriving Catholic Education sector that offers parents a choice of, and affordable access to, faith-based education for their children. Catholic Education continues to advocate for fair and inclusive funding that sustains both government and accessible faith-based school across Australia.

Catholic schools are universal in reach and open to all families who seek a Catholic Education. Australia's 1,755 Catholic schools educate one in five, or over 785,000 students and employs over 102,000 Australians. This makes Catholic schools the nation's largest provider of education outside government.

Our schools welcome students from a range of backgrounds including an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (up more than 180% since 2000). Students with disability represent 20% of Catholic school enrolments, 41% of students experience socio-educational disadvantage, and 38% of Catholic schools are in regional and remote areas.

In making the choice of a Catholic education, families take on 26% of the annual cost of their child's education and more than 90% of the funding required to support school buildings and capital works in Catholic schools. In 2020, Catholic school families contributed approximately \$3.7 billion towards their children's education, representing a substantial saving to Australian taxpayers. Catholic Education also acknowledges the ongoing support by the Australian government in the funding of Catholic schools.

Catholic schools make a significant contribution to the educational, moral, and social fabric of this nation. Our schools ensure that parents can choose an affordable education that is consistent with Catholic beliefs, values, and teachings. Catholic schools are committed to educational excellence and are underpinned by charisms of prayer, witness, catechesis, social justice, and pastoral care.

Student Wellbeing and Pastoral Care in Schools

Catholic Education strongly supports initiatives which enable and strengthen student wellbeing and pastoral care services in Australian schools.

There has been an increase of student health and wellbeing issues being addressed by Australia's schools. The COVID-19 pandemic has continued to present unprecedented challenges for schools and education systems. The pandemic has not only increased the number of students seeking support for mental health issues but also intensified the degree of the issues experienced by students.

The provision of student wellbeing and pastoral care services in Australian schools are crucial to support young people facing challenges relating to stress, relationships, managing emotions, social media, bullying, and health and lifestyle issues. Supporting young people and communities through pastoral care and wellbeing services are particularly important to Catholic schools as these services are central to the mission of Catholic Education.

The National School Chaplaincy Program in Catholic Schools

Feedback provided to the NCEC by Catholic school communities, state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, and other Catholic school authorities from across Australia indicates that the NSCP is a highly valued and highly effective program for supporting student wellbeing.

Catholic school communities use chaplains, chaplaincy workers, and resources provided through the NSCP to assist students across various spectrums of need and intervention for supporting student wellbeing such as the three categories identified in the consultation survey:

- students with high need or vulnerability
- students with some need or vulnerability, and
- students with no identified need or vulnerability (preventative).

Catholic school communities overwhelmingly indicated that the NSCP was both appropriate and effective to support students across all of these categories of need and intervention.

Areas of Student Need

Catholic school communities identified a vast range of areas of student need in which chaplains and chaplaincy workers supported students and their families. Some of these areas include:

- **Building connection and belonging:**
Young people have all been touched to differing degrees by the trauma of COVID-19 and the disconnect from school that occurred during the pandemic. Chaplains and chaplaincy worker have been pivotal in driving projects and programs to build connection and belonging within the school. They have ensured a variety of activities and spaces are operating so that students always have a place to go to build relationships.
- **Student leadership and empowerment:**
Chaplains and chaplaincy workers have played an essential role in student leadership and empowerment programs including bringing students' ideas and initiatives to fruition. They have

provided informal leadership opportunities for young people and have created partnerships within the wider community that have enabled young people to develop their leadership skills.

- **Inclusion and Diversity:**

Chaplains and chaplaincy workers supported and led inclusion and diversity initiatives. Often these workers can be an essential support person for LGBTQI+ students, refugee and First Nations people, and students with disability.

In some instances, chaplaincy workers are First Nations people with strong connections to community and country. In other examples, chaplaincy workers have been essential in accessing community grants, and driven school community anti-cyberbullying campaigns and surveys.

- **Support for other student and community welfare and wellbeing workers:**

Chaplains and chaplaincy workers have supported vulnerable students and families with Tier 1 wellbeing issues but may not need a psychologist, counsellor, or other greater levels of care and support, e.g. loss of family member, times of strain on the family, isolated students.

This helps to reduce the pressure on the school counsellors and social workers who are dealing with a sharp increase in Tier 2 and Tier 3 complex mental health presentations. This level of support can nurture a student/family at the point of need can prevent issues becoming all-consuming and/or requiring more formal and often more costly support.

- **Ensuring basic necessities:**

Large numbers of students and families are on Health Care and other cards and may need basic necessities such as food, clothing, and other support. Chaplains and chaplaincy workers often quietly provide shoes, a meal for a family, or just say check in with students who have parents with long term illness and are often in a semi-carer role.

- **More specialised roles:**

In some circumstances chaplains and chaplaincy workers have particular accredited qualifications which enable them to undertake more specialised roles within the school community.

Services and strategies

Chaplains and chaplaincy workers employed with the support of the NSCP provide an important and valuable contribution to the wellbeing of students and school communities through pastoral care services and student support strategies. They are integral members of school communities who work with parents, classroom teachers, school leaders, school counsellors, and Learning Support Teams to care for the needs and priorities of students and to ensure a greater belonging and connectedness.

The types of activities and services chaplains and chaplaincy workers undertake in Catholic school communities include:

- Informal wellbeing check-ins with students and families
- Small group work, e.g. Seasons for Growth, Top Blokes, school gardens
- Classroom work, e.g. reading with students
- Community & social justice work, e.g. Minnie Vinnies, visits to nursing homes
- Provide a listening ear and a caring presence to children in crisis
- Supporting student leadership and empowerment programs, e.g. Bullying No Way day, Close the Gap Day, Love your Body Week, Wear it Purple
- Communicating with parent representatives to support students and families in need
- Working with the school counsellor to support children requiring social and emotional support
- Supervise alternate play spaces within school playground (creating a safe place)
- Provide structured breaks for students from the playground or classroom on an as needs basis

By co-designing these activities with students, educators, parents, and school leaders the support provided by chaplains and chaplaincy workers integrates with the broader pastoral care provided by the school community.

As one Catholic school teacher put it,

(The chaplain) ... supports individuals and small groups to ensure their physical and emotional wellbeing. She responds to individual children's needs as they are identified. She is also proactive in establishing programs that meet the criteria of best practice in Pastoral Care.

Another teacher said that the NSCP provides "a place where all students can get assistance and feel safe and comfortable to talk openly about all matters." This was also reflected by a 12 year old student in a Catholic school who said, "...she helps me deal with family problems and friendship problems without judging you. No matter what. You can trust them so much. "

In addition to intentionally designed programs, chaplains and chaplaincy workers often attend school events to meet parents in a more informal setting, which promotes social and proactive engagement. This often allows for more casual and impromptu conversations and can be beneficial for parents who have limited time available for in-school meetings, those who have concerns they feel are minor yet wish to discuss, and/or parents who may be reluctant to approach school staff more formally.

Importantly, in the words of a Catholic school leader, the care provided under the NSCP "creates an ethos of wellbeing that ensures stronger engagement, higher attendance, and better educational outcomes for all our students."

The Deputy Principal of a Catholic school in a regional area which has been devastated by the tragic deaths of five local students and young people in 2022 stated,

(our school) has relied heavily on our chaplaincy worker for many years and the thought of not having one next year is causing grave concern... Our school will be infinitely affected if we do not have this vital role ..., and the wellbeing of our young people will be reduced because of the absence of this very special person. I can't emphasise how vitally important our chaplaincy worker is and how desperately we need them to be funded.

Recommendations

As highlighted above, feedback provided to the NCEC by Catholic school communities, state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, and other Catholic school authorities from across Australia demonstrates that the NSCP is a highly valued and highly effective program for supporting student wellbeing. A range of suggestions to refine, improve, and strengthen the NSCP were also made.

Based on this feedback, the NCEC makes the following recommendations to the current evaluation of the NSCP:

Recommendation 1:

The NSCP is recognised and acknowledged as being a highly valued and highly effective program for supporting student wellbeing in Australian schools. This support has been particularly important and valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation 2:

As a highly valued and highly effective program, governments should progress and sign a project funding agreement to ensure the continuation of the NSCP and provide funding certainty for a period of at least five years.

Recommendation 3:

Funding and maximum hours available the NSCP should be increased to reflect cost of living and inflationary costs in order to ensure that funding and available hours are more conducive to secure and sustainable employment for workers engaged under the NSCP.

Recommendation 4:

Given the late stage of the 2022 school year, school communities currently funded under the NSCP should have funding for their services rolled over for 2023.

Recommendation 5:

School communities, including Catholic school communities, should continue to be enabled to employ chaplains and chaplaincy workers under the NSCP who are most appropriately qualified and best suited to their local school community, needs, and culture without reducing the qualifications and certifications currently required under the program.

Recommendation 6:

As many schools and chaplaincy workers have experienced challenges in accessing timely training in the prescribed qualifications which include competencies in mental health and making appropriate referrals, consideration should be given to how better support workers to access and complete this training and other appropriate resources.

Recommendation 7:

As many schools experience similar need but only some are able to access assistance via the NSCP, consideration should be given to providing funding for chaplains or chaplaincy workers to all schools which meet the requirements for application.

Recommendation 8:

Consideration should be given to how best to clarify and simplify the application process for school communities to be funded under the NSCP. Consideration should also be given to how to better balance the reporting requirements for school communities once they have funded under the program.

Conclusion

Catholic Education welcomes the recent additional support that governments have provided to fund new and existing programs which raise awareness and provide assistance for student mental health and wellbeing. Catholic Education strongly believes that renewed government commitment and funding to the NSCP, together with some refinements to the program, will compliment and strengthen these initiatives and provide much needed care to students and families.

Should you have any further questions in relation to this submission, please contact me via phone 02 8229 0808 or via email jacinta.collins@ncec.catholic.edu.au.

Yours faithfully



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