



NATIONAL SCHOOL CHAPLAINCY PROGRAM SUBMISSION

DATE 14 SEPTEMBER 2022

1. KEY POINTS / EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Independent Schools Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP) review. The NSCP has been of great value to the Independent school sector in their ongoing commitment to the development of positive relationships and improved education and wellbeing outcomes.

Independent schools prioritise community, teacher and student mental health and wellbeing. Research commissioned by Independent Schools Australia highlights that poor student wellbeing affects school attendance, learning and academic outcomes and that students with a mental health disorder can lag almost three years behind their peers by early secondary school.¹ Schools play an important role in student, staff and community wellbeing to build resilience, self-efficacy and the ability to cope with adversity.

There is strong evidence for the effectiveness of school interventions for students' positive wellbeing and mental health². The NSCP supports whole of school approaches, small group prevention strategies, targeted programs and/or 1:1 interventions.

School chaplains develop positive relationships with students, staff and their communities, providing critical support and pastoral care.

The Independent school sector highly values the NSCP and recommends the program continues for current participating schools, that funding certainty is provided, and the program is extended to all Independent schools and supports the scope being widened to include wellbeing officers.

2. ABOUT ISA

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. It comprises the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISA represents 1,187 schools and over 667,000 students, accounting for approximately 16 per cent of Australian school enrolments.

ISA's major role is to bring the unique needs and contributions of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the sector on national issues.

¹ Runions and Cross, "Student and Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health" (Independent Schools Australia, May 2022).

² Dr Emily Berger et al, "School-Based Prevention and Early Intervention for Student Mental Health and Wellbeing - Evidence Brief" (Monash University, March 2020), <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/counselling-and-psychology-services/mental-health-programs-and-partnerships/evidence-based-mental-health-wellbeing-programs-for-schools#Common0>.

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Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a specific educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. A number of Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs or to reflect the religious values of a community. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Quaker and Seventh Day Adventist schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other factors.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some Independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example Lutheran schools. Systemic schools account for 20 per cent of schools in the Independent sector. Four out of five schools in the sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

3. ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION

ISA prepared this submission in response to the consultation process commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education to evaluate and assess the current effectiveness of the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP). This submission provides an Independent school sector review of the benefits and value of the NSCP.

ISA consulted with the state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) in preparing this submission. The very tight time-frame limited the depth and scope of this consultation. Consequently while our response contains pertinent points, we have been unable to provide quantitative back up data from the Independent school sector.

4. INTRODUCTION

With the decrease in the average age onset of mental illness in recent decades, the Independent school sector is faced with managing wellbeing and mental health problems in more children than

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ever before. The management and prevention of mental illness and enhanced whole-school wellbeing has become a critical issue for all Australian schools³.

Traditionally, the mental health and wellbeing of students was left to the mental health care system, which plays a role in managing mental health once it has progressed to crisis level, rather than prevention and early intervention.⁴ However, schools now have an essential role in supporting student wellbeing and play a key part in prevention and management strategies for students' mental health.

Prevention programs and whole school approaches by themselves are not enough. Providing schools with the necessary resources to deliver these important strategies is essential. As with other sectors, the NSCP funding enables school chaplains in Independent schools to provide pastoral care and much needed support to vulnerable, disengaged or at-risk students. Reflecting the diversity of Independent school sector, chaplains respond to the needs and context of each individual school and target student support where it is most needed.

The Independent school sector highly values the NSCP in supporting the wellbeing of students and as 83 percent of Australian Independent schools have a religious affiliation, this program aligns well to schools' values and beliefs.

5. EVALUATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE NSCP

It is hard to quantify the efficacy of a school chaplain but the narratives, school survey results and positive views of teachers, school leaders, parents and students themselves, about the value of their work makes it easy to qualify their effectiveness. The NSCP is significantly contributing to positive wellbeing in school communities.

The Independent school sector is diverse, catering for a wide range of students. This makes it difficult to summarise the characteristics of students benefiting from the NSCP. A strength of the program is that school chaplains are able to work with a range of students according to need, including those who find themselves in difficult circumstances resulting in challenging behaviours, those with poor self-image, experiencing a dysfunctional family life, lacking perspective or direction, feeling hopelessness, suffering depression or anxiety, engaging in self-harm behaviours, at risk of abuse, misusing drugs or alcohol or a range of other factors and influences.

Chaplains in Independent schools use a range of strategies. They provide students with intensive 1:1 support, work with small groups or whole school wellbeing programs. The strategies they use may be proactive, preventative or reactive to a specific situation, e.g. a critical event, reported abuse, bullying, cyber issues.

Typically, in Independent schools, school chaplains forge strong connections and positive relationships with students, building trust and rapport in a way that may be different to student / teacher relationships. Their influence and work, especially in stressful situations is seen by

³ Dr Emily Berger et al.

⁴ Runions and Cross, "Student and Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health."

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participating schools to be highly effective. One school reported that their chaplain's work, humanity and professional skills were an essential support to students, the principal, leadership team, staff and parents during a critical incident which impacted their whole school community.

Depending on school size and resourcing, school chaplains often support and promote wellbeing as part of a student welfare team, working with school counsellors, psychologists and leadership to support students, referring them to appropriate support as required. Chaplains themselves repeatedly report, however, referral to external specialised support is difficult with waiting times of three to six months for psychologists and over six months for psychiatrists, providing limited referral options for schools. The more in-house support a school can immediately provide, the greater chance a young person has of gaining immediate help and reducing the possibility of long-term mental health issues. Chaplains are pivotal in this.

A number of chaplains in Independent schools also provide pastoral care services and strategies to support broader school community wellbeing including activities such as breakfast clubs, excursions, lunchtime activities and parent/carer workshops.

Continuing the NSCP and the addition of wellbeing officers to the program will enable schools to sustain and embed the preventative and intervention programs described above.

6. ADMINISTRATION OF THE NSCP

In spite of the huge value the NSCP provides to schools, requests to Associations of Independent Schools for assistance in student wellbeing matters continues to increase. The Australian Government's ongoing support of the NSCP is important, valued and effective. To delay or put funding at risk, would exacerbate the mental health crisis experienced by many young people in accessing timely support

Providing the Independent school sector with confirmation of funding at least six months prior to program delivery would enable Independent schools to plan effectively, retain staff employed under the NSCP, provide ongoing support and embed wellbeing strategies.

An increase in the funding of the program would allow schools to improve the remuneration available to school chaplains and go some way to addressing attraction and retention issues and potentially allow expansion of the support available.

7. CONCLUSION

The feedback from the Independent school sector confirmed the effectiveness and positive impact of the NSCP, the need for its continuity and the desirability of expanding funding and services.

The NSCP makes significant contribution to schools by supporting students individually, and in groups, by delivering prevention, support and intervention programs and by offering support to staff, school leaders and families as appropriate to the context and needs of the school.

Teachers are under increasing pressure, therefore the additional support provided by the NSCP to students and in implementing whole school wellbeing strategies is critical.

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Having dedicated wellbeing staff working with prevention and proactive programs enables Independent schools to continue to build positive wellbeing cultures⁵. Building school capacity to respond quickly to students experiencing poor wellbeing, anxiety and depression is also essential. The continuation of the NSCP is critical to achieving those goals for the Independent school sector.

ISA welcomes the announcement by the Minister for Education indicating the NSCP will continue to support student and school community wellbeing in the future with funding continuity for current participating schools for 2023.

Expanding the program from 2024 to 2027 and extending it to non-participating schools will provide further essential support to schools. The inclusion of student welfare officers into the program will enable Independent schools to engage individuals with a range of skills that will assist schools to continue to manage the on-going mental health and wellbeing concerns of students.

⁵ “National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy” (Australian Government, 2021), <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/5b7112be-6402-4b23-919d-8fb9b6027506/National-Children%E2%80%99s-Mental-Health-and-Wellbeing-Strategy-%E2%80%93-Report>.