

Media Release

\$42m chaplains program 'excludes most schools'

The Federal Government has been urged to revamp its \$42.8 million chaplains-in-schools program because of lack of proof that it is the best option for students.

Ian Robinson, President of the Australian Rationalists Society, said it was negligent to give more money to a program with so few checks and balances. "The Howard Government paid for religious chaplains to win a few votes. It had no intention of testing the program's effectiveness – and now a year out from an election Kevin Rudd is following suit.

"Changes are needed in 2010 and 2011 to permit rigorous evaluation, otherwise the churches will again dictate public policy through a scheme that breaches the Constitution."

In a letter to Education Minister Julia Gillard, the Rationalists call for

- Rigorous testing of schools to compare religious and non-religious student support programs
- A proper assessment of school support needs, Australia-wide
- Transparent reporting on the qualifications of chaplains and schools to supervise contact with students for chaplains who have no appropriate tertiary training
- Greater clarity for parents on what constitutes "proselytising" or "selling" religion
- A ban on prayers at whole-of-school or whole-of-class events such as assemblies, camps and award ceremonies

The Rationalists criticised the lack of meaningful data and a recent widely quoted study which failed to ask government school principals whether they preferred non-religious student support.

The letter says that more than 72.5 per cent of all schools are excluded and that wealthy and poor schools are treated alike. "This program discriminates at every level and there is absolutely no evidence that chaplains should be favoured above more qualified staff just because they are endorsed by religious institutions."

The Rationalists said it was unacceptable that a mere 12 per cent of 1,031 chaplains surveyed had relevant tertiary training and fewer than three per cent had counselling and psychology qualifications. "Kids are taking serious relationships and mental health issues to chaplains who are mostly ill-equipped to deal with these problems.

"Surely, there are far more worthy student support programs than this. The National Safe Schools Framework, sex and relationships education and mental health and wellbeing programs such as Mind Matters are all grossly underfunded but badly needed in schools."

Further comments and interviews:

Ian Robinson

President, Rationalist Society of Australia

Phone 0407 240 024