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Classroom attack on gambling problems

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SCHOOL maths classes would be used in a federal plan to stop children being caught in an explosion of problem gambling. Community Services Minister Kay Patterson wants to teach secondary students about the odds of becoming a betting loser.

In its first major policy move since the election, the Howard Government is preparing an assault on gambling. More than a quarter of Australia's problem gamblers are under 25.

Senator Patterson said new prevention strategies were needed to stop young people getting hooked and becoming hardcore gamblers for life.

"We might need to tackle them differently to older groups," Senator Patterson told the *Herald Sun*.

"Perhaps you could do it in classes with mathematics, in probabilities – so that people could realise the likelihood of them winning. It's one way of showing how mathematics can be applied in everyday life."

An estimated 330,000 Australians, about 2 per cent of the population, are problem gamblers.

They account for about 30 per cent of the \$15 billion spent on gambling each year, punting up to \$4.5 billion.

Concerned about the impact of problem gambling on families, the Government is examining a range of new tactics, including:

USING doctors to help identify and treat problem gamblers.

SETTING up a national gaming research institute.

A GREATER role for Centrelink staff to identify problem gamblers and direct them to counselling.

NEW regulations on ATMs at gaming venues.

Senator Patterson met banking industry representatives recently to examine restrictions on cash machines in casinos and pokie venues.

Warning messages – such as "Do you really wish to take more money out of your account?" – could appear on ATM screens for gamblers making multiple withdrawals in one day.

Another option would be to limit the number of withdrawals, or the amount withdrawn, from ATMs located in or near gaming venues.

The proposed national gaming research institute could become a key player in setting the agenda on new tactics to tackle the problem.

It would be based at a university, with satellite centres across the nation, and would effectively analyse Australian and international research on gambling to help governments decide which strategies work.

Senator Patterson will discuss the classroom education plan with Education Minister Brendan Nelson before presenting it to state and territory gaming ministers early next year.

The Federal Government has no direct power over schools or gaming laws, but wants to work with the states to educate teenagers about the dangers of heavy gambling.

"I've been looking at whether we should have some sort of schools and youth project – would it have an effect on the ones who would become hardcore gamblers?" Senator Patterson said.

"We need to teach young people the essence of how they (gaming companies) operate – that they're businesses and don't just give money away for free.

"Whatever you do, you have to change the behaviour, and it's got to be on-going. It has to meet the new lot of gamblers coming through, it has to have the prevention element."

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