

# First, check the instructions

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**D**espite recent concerns about our declining performance in international testing, we are very lucky in Australia to have a high quality education system, and for better or worse, one of its distinguishing features is choice. With a strong Catholic system, and a broad variety of independent schools catering to a range of faiths from Anglican, to Jewish to Islamic and even Hare Krishna students, Australian children and parents have more choice in terms of the accessing schools affiliated with a particular religion than most countries in the world.

It is interesting, then, in a country which prides itself on public education that, in line with the Victorian Education Act of 1872, is “secular, compulsory and free” the role of special religious education is still a matter for hot debate.

Special Religious Instruction (SRI) goes by a number of other names across the jurisdictions, including Special Religious Education in Western Australia and NSW, and Religious Instruction in School Hours in Queensland. It refers specifically to classes designed to teach students about the beliefs and practices of one particular denomination and is distinct from what is commonly known as Religious Education, the latter dealing with comparing beliefs, practices and the history of religions in general.

So how did SRI become so entrenched in our public school system, and why is it so contentious? The answer spans both political and cultural concerns.

The issue of SRI in public schools is undeniably a politically-charged one, with groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby regularly publishing online responses from the major parties to questions about religious education in the lead-up to elections. Before the 2014 Federal Election, for example, candidates were asked how they planned to redress the imbalance in the Australian Curriculum and give due emphasis to the transformative impact of Christianity on Western Civilisation (Australian Christian Lobby, 2013). The responses of eight political parties were posted online, including the Liberal and Labor Parties.

State and territory elections attract similar attention, largely because each jurisdiction has its own laws governing education. This makes it difficult for political parties to negotiate a unifying ideal or approach on a federal level. It also adds a layer of complexity that ensures that the way SRI manifests itself in the public school system looks quite different from one



jurisdiction to another.

In New South Wales, for example, “In every government school, time is to be allowed for the religious education of children of any religious persuasion, but the total number of hours so allowed in a year is not to exceed, for each child, the number of school weeks in the year” (NSW Government, 2014). This is in contrast to the ACT where SRI is provided at

the request of the parents: “If parents of children at a government school ask the principal for their children to receive religious education in a particular religion, the principal must ensure that reasonable time is allowed for their children’s religious education in that religion” (ACT, 2012).

Recent comments by Kevin Donnelly, one of the Abbot Government’s appointees to review the



Australian Curriculum have, however, dragged the issue back onto the national agenda. An ABC News article suggests that Mr Donnelly believes, “Australian education has become too secular, and the federation’s Judeo-Christian heritage should be better reflected in the curriculum” (ABC News, 2014). This is where cultural elements also come into play, but while many believe that it is essential that Christian education be offered in all our schools, there are also a large number of opponents to this proposition.

In Queensland which, according to a Southern Cross University researcher has the least secular education system in the country (Byrne, C and Hurst, D 2014), mother-of-two Tricia Moore filed an anti-discrimination complaint against the state’s Department of Education, alleging that students who opt out of SRI classes are treated unfairly by being not being given meaningful alternatives (Jabour, B, 2012). Similar legal action has also been launched, although unsuccessfully, in Victoria.

These challenges reflect the changing attitudes to religion in Australia. While at the time of Federation, 97 per cent of the population identified themselves as Christian in the Census, the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures indicate that the number of people describing themselves as Christian had fallen to 61.1 per cent and the number describing themselves as having no religion in the 2011 Census was 22.3 per cent, having increased by 3.6 per cent between 2006 and 2011 (ABS, 2013).





The lack of a viable alternative for students not taking SRI classes continues to be one of the greatest objections to the provision of religious instruction in schools. In Victoria, for instance, “Principals must ensure core curriculum is not delivered to non-attendees during the period of SRI,” although students not attending SRI lessons must be, “engaged in positive, independent learning such as self-study, including revision or other activities, for example, community service, peer mentoring, participation in clubs or instruction in areas outside the core curriculum” (State Government Victoria, 2014). Queensland has similar restrictions on what students who have opted out are able to do during SRI time:

“Students who do not attend RI are placed in an alternative activity and supervised in a separate area. The content of this alternative instruction is monitored by the principal, who must ensure that it does not create educational disadvantage to students attending RI. Activities may include wider reading, doing personal research or revision of class work” (Queensland Government, 2011).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some instances students have been left in corridors to read or draw while their classmates are at SRI lessons, however, even when schools do provide more industrious pursuits, children who are withdrawn from SRI are losing half an hour or more in meaningful instruction time each

week. While the new Australian Curriculum acknowledges religious education in various ways, it certainly does not encompass the single faith-based methodology used in SRI classes. Given the increased pressures on schools to deliver content in what is often described as a ‘crowded curriculum’, it would seem counter-intuitive to give over teaching time to a subject that is optional, and that in our increasingly multi-cultural society, does not meet the needs of a growing number of students.

Karen Higgins has a son in year 10 who opted out of SRI when it was introduced at his Victorian public primary school in Year 5, as well as a son currently in Year 3. Her younger son Jaydyn has been attending SRI classes since prep, largely due to what at the time was an ‘opt out’ rather than an ‘opt in’ system. “I was too late to respond that I didn’t want him to do the classes, and he had already gone to RE with his friends,” Higgins explains. “He made a finger puppet or something in the first session and didn’t want to give it up!”

Higgins supports the notion that SRI classes should be opt-in, a condition only recently introduced in Victoria, and also believes that parents should have been given the opportunity to meet the people who take the classes before they were introduced. The issue of the quality of the lessons being provided in school time has also come under recent scrutiny, especially in Victoria, where Access Ministries provides around 96 per cent of SRI Christian Instructors (FIRIS). Monash University lecturer Dr David Zyngier was quoted early in 2014 as saying, “I have reviewed all six booklets produced by Access Ministries, and it’s basically low order, unintelligent, busy work and rote learning”(Marshall, K, 2014). Dr Zyngier also

expressed concern that the classes were taken by volunteers rather than qualified teachers, a fact that many parents are unaware of.

New South Wales has managed to side step the issue of what students who opt out of SRI do to some degree with the introduction of ethics classes as an alternative. Offered by Primary Ethics, a public company formed by the St James Ethics Centre, the classes involve, “teaching children how to approach ethical issues while developing their capacity for moral reasoning” (Primary Ethics, 2014). Ethics classes have proved so popular that it has been a challenge to recruit enough volunteers to take the lessons, and the groundswell of support has also allowed the mandate to provide the lessons to withstand the introduction of a private member’s bill by the Reverend Fred Nile to repeal the *Ethics Classes Amendment Act*.

Another point of difference in NSW is the ability of schools to offer multiple streams of SRI to cater to a broader range of beliefs. Penny Styles enrolled daughter Georgia in Anglican Scripture Class at her Sydney public primary school, largely because her husband thought it would be a good idea since her grandfather was a senior member of the Anglican Church. Styles recalls that Georgia’s school also had other alternatives including Baptist, Catholic and Buddhist options – a detail that she was made well aware of when Georgia accidentally attended the Catholic stream for a term! Georgia stayed in the classes until Year 3 or 4 when she decided that she preferred not to do SRI anymore, and so went into the non-religious class. Styles notes that if ethics classes had been available at the time, she still would have been guided by her husband’s wishes, but that she would have been happy for Georgia to attend the ethics class when she opted out of SRI.

### “You don’t have to go to church to develop values and morals or to be a good friend.”

As the push for increased school autonomy intensifies and schools are held more accountable for their results, there is potential for public school principals to exercise greater control over how time is allocated. This is already evident in Victoria, where earlier this year the principal of Cranbourne South Primary School decided to stop the provision of SRI classes after examining the content and concluding, “It is rubbish – hollow and empty rhetoric... my school teachers are committed to teaching children, not indoctrinating them” (Marshall, 2014).

Teaching students strong values is often used as a justification for religious instruction in public schools, but as Karen Higgins points out, “You don’t have to go to church to develop values and morals or to be a good friend.” It remains to be seen whether ethics classes, or other alternatives to SRI, will be adopted in other jurisdictions in response to the changing cultural and religious climate in Australia, or indeed whether the responsibility for coordinating their children’s faith development will fall back to public school parents.

#### Further reading

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