

IMPLEMENTATION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION POLICY

1. DEFINITIONS OF GENERAL AND SPECIAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

General religious education (GRE) is education about the world's major religions, what people believe and how that belief affects their lives. It is taught mainly through the school curriculum.

Special religious education (SRE) is education in the beliefs and practices of an approved religious persuasion by authorised representatives of that persuasion.

2. PARENTS/CAREGIVERS RIGHTS

In accordance with Section 33 of the Education Act, no child is required to receive any general religious education or special religious education if the parents/caregivers object. Objections should be made in writing to the principal of the school.

Section 26 of the Act provides for students to be exempt from attending classes at the request of parents/caregivers who conscientiously object on religious grounds to a particular part of a course of study.

A. Certificate of Exemption

Section 26 of the Education Act provides for students to be exempt from attending classes at the request of parents/caregivers who conscientiously object on religious grounds.

Principals are responsible for responding sensitively to the beliefs of parents/caregivers and their children and for taking all steps to minimise feelings of discomfort or embarrassment on the part of students. This will be aided by the publication of a clear school policy and procedures statement for the benefit of staff and parents/caregivers and contain a statement about:

- the right of parents/caregivers under the Act to take this action
- the responsibility of the school to provide information about courses if requested
- appropriate supervision or alternative studies
- providing advice to parents/caregivers about any implication for the award of the School Certificate or Higher School Certificate.
- the school's certificate of exemption
- keeping a record of the parent's written request and the certificate of exemption
- providing of a copy of the school's certificate of exemption to the student.

Example

CERTIFICATE OF EXEMPTION

NAME OF SCHOOL

Student's
name _____

Class/Year _____

Under the provisions of Section 26 of the Education Act 1990, the above named student is exempt, on the basis of conscientious objection on religious grounds, from the following classes or lessons

Principal's signature

Date:

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF SPECIAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Introduction

Under the Education Act 1990 Section 32 there is a legislative requirement that "In every government school, time is to be allowed for the religious education of children of any religious persuasion". In accordance with this section of the Act, the times for such education "are to be fixed by agreement between the principal of the school and the local member of the clergy or other religious teacher of that persuasion". The "local member" refers to the person nominated by the religious group to authorise special religious education teachers, courses and materials.

Religious persuasions, on approval by the Minister, provide Special Religious Education (SRE) for students in Government schools. The provision of SRE at a school is dependent on parents/caregivers nominating, at or subsequent to enrolment, that persuasion for the purpose of SRE.

These implementation procedures are based on the Recommendations 36-72 of the report *Religion in Education in NSW Government Schools* (1980) which were adopted by the Government as the basis of an agreement with the churches about the implementation of SRE. They clearly define the respective responsibilities of the school, religious persuasions and parents/caregivers, and emphasise the need to implement SRE in a flexible way based on consultation and co-operation.

A. Responsibilities of schools

Schools are to provide SRE where authorised representatives of approved providers are available.

1. SRE should be an integral part of school activities, taking place in school hours and under the jurisdiction of the school.
2. SRE should be organised for fixed times by negotiation and agreement between the principal of the school and the authorised religious persuasions which will provide the teachers.
3. Schools are to support SRE by ensuring that no formal lessons or scheduled school activities occur during time set aside for SRE. Such activities may create conflict of choice for some parents and for some students attending SRE.
4. Arrangements should be reviewed regularly with the representatives of the religious persuasions
5. On average, not more than one hour per week should be allocated for SRE. A flexible time schedule could be used, subject to the agreement of the parties concerned and provided that the time allocated in any one year does not exceed, for each student, an average of one hour per school week.
6. The lessons or period length for SRE should be consistent with the age and attention span of the students and the content and method of presentation.
7. At enrolment, schools record a specific religion or "No religion" on the enrolment record. Parents/caregivers are to be advised:
 - a. the nature of SRE at the school, including the religious persuasions providing SRE and the arrangements which will be made for those students whose parents/caregivers indicate that they are not to attend SRE;
 - b. that they may nominate an alternative persuasion, where SRE is not offered for students of a particular religious persuasion or for other reasons.
8. Parents/caregivers are to be advised annually of the organisation of SRE classes. This advice should inform the parents/caregivers of the religious persuasions that will be providing SRE for particular class or year groups.
9. Parents are to be advised of any changed organisation and the availability of any new SRE class.
10. In times set aside for SRE, students not attending are to be separated from SRE classes.
11. Schools are to provide appropriate care and supervision at school for students not attending SRE. This may involve students in other activities such as completing homework, reading and private study. These activities should neither compete with SRE nor be alternative lessons in the subjects within the curriculum or other areas, such as, ethics, values, civics or general religious education. When insufficient teachers or accommodation are available, the school's policy on minimal supervision will operate.

12. Only those persons authorised by approved religious persuasions may be involved in the provision of SRE.
13. Complaints concerning alleged teaching inefficiency or distortion of religious doctrine should be referred to the representative of the approved persuasion who authorises the teacher.
14. The principal retains an overall supervision responsibility for the conduct of SRE. Class teachers are not required to attend SRE classes, but may, with the agreement of the SRE teacher, assist or remain in the classroom.
15. The school reserves the right to intervene in cases where it is necessary to maintain good order and conduct when an unreasonable disruption occurs to the school. The principal should pursue such matters with the relevant approved SRE providers and, if necessary, with officers of the Department of Education and Training.
16. The school is not responsible for and should not disseminate details of lesson content for SRE, but may indicate the name and method of contacting the approved provider or their local representative.
17. Student information is confidential and teachers of SRE are to be provided with only the names of the students in their class and any special information, such as disability or special need, which might affect the behaviour or performance of particular students.

B. Responsibilities of providers

1. The authorisation of personnel to teach SRE is the sole responsibility of each individual religious persuasion. The persuasions are not to authorise any person as a SRE teacher who has not signed a prohibited employment declaration or who has a criminal conviction for:
 - a crime against a minor; or
 - violence; or
 - sexual assault;. or
 - the provision of prohibited drugs.

In the case of paid employees of religious persuasions, working with children checks are required.

Every approved religious persuasion must provide, annually to the Department, a written assurance that they have procedures in place to ensure compliance with this requirement. These assurances are to be sent to:

The Executive Officer
Director-General's Consultative Committee on SRE
Private Bag 3
RYDE 2112 NSW

2. It is the responsibility of each persuasion to provide sufficient SRE teachers. The relevant representative of the religious persuasion should inform the principal when SRE teachers are unavailable.

3. It is the responsibility of the approved religious persuasion to:
 - a) authorise representatives to teach SRE
 - b) authorise materials and pedagogy used by SRE teachers
 - c) ensure that the school is informed of the names and contact details of authorised SRE teachers.
 - d) provide information about the content of lessons when requested by parents/caregivers.

C. Rights and responsibilities of parents/caregivers

1. Throughout the child's schooling, parents/caregivers have the right to enrol their child in, or object to any form of SRE at any time, without being required to state any reason. Notification of any changes to enrolment in SRE or changes in persuasion should be given to the school in writing.
2. Parents/caregivers who enrol their children in SRE classes should recognise their responsibility to support SRE wherever possible.

D. School organisation

1. School SRE co-ordinator

Where appropriate, a member of staff should be appointed as the school's SRE coordinator. Duties of the co-ordinator could include:

- a. arranging consultations by the middle of Term 4 between the school and representatives of the approved religious persuasions to determine the SRE organisation for the ensuing year
- b. liaising with SRE teachers to:
 - i) familiarise them with the procedures and operations of the school, especially at the beginning of the year
 - ii) advise them of any variations of school routine affecting SRE
- c. maintaining SRE records, including:
 - i) obtaining an up-to-date list of the authorised SRE teachers from the approved religious persuasions
 - ii) ensuring that SRE teachers are given a list of the names of students in their class
- d. preparing advice for parents/caregivers on the organisation and composition of SRE classes and informing them of any changes.

2. Patterns of SRE organisation

The following patterns are some possible ways of organising SRE in schools. Care should be taken not to adopt any form of organisation which could be of more benefit to some persuasions than to others.

(a) Patterns based on class groups

- i. **Weekly class groups:** In many schools, especially at the infants, primary and junior secondary levels, class-based organisation will support SRE because it features regular

- contact, planned and systematic teaching, and the opportunity for close interpersonal relationships.
- ii. **Block teaching:** Instead of a weekly period, SRE lessons can be timetabled to occupy blocks of time approximately equivalent to a year of weekly lessons. Lessons might occur on consecutive days, for one week twice a term, or for two weeks in succession. Other variations include half-day blocks taught three times during a term.
 - iii. **One term a year:** When there are a limited number of SRE teachers, students in one year group could have SRE once a week for one term. SRE could be provided for a different term for each year group.
 - iv. **Rotation of classes:** The SRE lessons for a class or year could be timetabled to alternate with some other features of the curriculum, such as tutorial groups, special assemblies or year meetings on a fortnightly, month by month, or full term basis.
 - v. **Seminars, conferences and one-day programs:** This approach may be incorporated in a regular program of seminars, conferences and other learning experiences organised for Years 11 and 12. These arrangements are most suited to the senior secondary years but could be used with Years 9-10 and, in special circumstances, with junior secondary or primary years. This pattern provides an opportunity for specialised personnel, equipment and resources to be used. Only approved religious persuasions with students enrolled for their SRE may organise such programs. When time is allocated for these programs, then the school must ensure that there is equality of opportunity for all persuasions to organise similar programs.
 - vi. **Small group dialogue:** Students may be organised into small groups for lessons with a member of the clergy or other religious teacher. This approach is often used as an adjunct to other systems, such as seminars and conferences.
 - vii. **Assemblies:** While not normally a desirable method for regular SRE, special denominational assemblies provide an opportunity for religious participation, especially in relation to major festivals. They also facilitate the use of specialised personnel, resource materials and equipment.

(b) Patterns based on grouping persuasions

When a number of religious persuasions agree to combine to provide SRE, these religious persuasions have to authorise the persons who teach and authorise the content of the religious teaching. No religious persuasion can be compelled to participate in these patterns of organisation. These patterns should be periodically reviewed and evaluated jointly by the school and the religious persuasions. No religious persuasion

should feel compelled to continue to be included in any particular pattern.

i. Combined groups

SRE teachers are assigned to classes with students from participating denominations. This format is generally used when there are insufficient SRE teachers to staff denominational class groups. This form of organisation may include:

- weekly class meetings
- block teaching
- one term per year arrangements and
- a teacher appointed by one or more religious persuasions who operates across the timetable.

Where these formats are implemented the following criteria must be met:

1. Local members of the clergy or other religious teachers of approved religious persuasions are to agree on the format, approve the content of the religious teaching and authorise the SRE teachers.
2. The organisation for persuasions not part of these arrangements should be separately negotiated.
3. No religious persuasion may be compelled to participate in such arrangements and care should be taken to overcome any disadvantage to non-participating persuasions as a result of this organisation
4. Parents/caregivers are to be informed of both the nature of the particular format to be adopted and the religious persuasions which have agreed to participate. The persuasions should, if requested by parents/caregivers, make available an outline of the content of the religious teaching to assist parents/caregivers to make a decision regarding their child's attendance.
5. Students who are registered as belonging to a persuasion other than those that have authorised the teacher(s) may attend such classes only with the specific approval of their parents/caregivers.
6. Schools are to provide appropriate care for students not attending SRE classes under these arrangements.
7. These arrangements may be supplemented with opportunities for specific denominational religious teaching.
8. SRE teachers are not to interfere with the operation of the school.

ii. Seminars, conferences and one-day programs

Only approved religious persuasions with students enrolled for their SRE may organise such programs. When organised jointly, the relevant religious persuasions have to agree to the format, authorise the teacher(s) and approve the religious teaching.

iii. Assemblies

SRE assemblies, organised by one or more of the religious persuasions for a particular religious festival, provide an

opportunity for religious persuasions to make use of the time allowed for SRE.

(c) Other patterns

Where SRE is provided by other means, these arrangements need to be negotiated with the school principal and could include:

i. Individual or group research and assignment

This method has been employed by some SRE teachers in association with contract-type teaching or in open class situations in primary schools. It may be suitable for use on a private study basis, especially for students for whom face-to-face teaching is not available. It may be useful for interested post-compulsory students who do not attend their school at the times when SRE is offered.

ii. Distance education

SRE is now available to some isolated students receiving distance education. Enquiries regarding the availability of material should state the religious persuasion and be directed to the Executive Officer of the Director-General's Consultative Committee on Special Religious Education, Private Bag 3, Ryde, NSW, 2112

(d) Supporting patterns

In agreeing to any supporting arrangements the principal is to take into account the overall provision of SRE for the nominating persuasion and the capacity of the personnel to carry out that activity within the principal's duty of care.

i. Excursions and visits

Visits to certain places or events can be planned to provide some specific learning experience, often associated with a particular religious festival. Such excursions on a school day are the responsibility of the religious persuasion, which will negotiate the time with the principal, organise the excursion, seek parental approval and provide supervision. The nature of the excursion must be explained by the participating persuasions to parents/caregivers, a permission note for the parents/caregivers' is to be approved by the Principal and the completed permission notes returned to the school.

ii. Camps and out of school contact

These are extra-curricular in nature and additional to SRE programs operating within schools. Where possible, principals should make sure that parents/caregivers are clear that these activities are not school activities. Schools should have no involvement in such activities. It should be made quite clear that these are organised by the relevant religious persuasions and are not school activities as such.

iii. Support personnel

By arrangement between the principal and the approved provider, SRE teachers may be provided with accommodation to

conduct interviews of a religious nature with students of their own persuasion, in the lunch hour or other agreed-upon times. These contacts, including any of an informal nature, should have due regard to school organisation and requirements and parental wishes.

Where an SRE teacher assists the school in a voluntary capacity for school activities other than SRE, then that person is classified as a volunteer and has the same responsibilities and rights as all other volunteers. Principals and these volunteers should ensure that, in all interactions with students, they respect the religious or non-religious beliefs of students.

If the school has a person under *the Commonwealth National School Chaplaincy Programme*, this person could teach SRE in addition to their work under this program, but not as part of it. In relation to their SRE work they would come under the provisions for SRE.

4. CURRICULUM RELATED PROGRAMS WITH A RELIGIOUS BASE

When considering the use of external curriculum-related programs that have been developed by a religious persuasion, principals should ensure that these programs do not implicitly or explicitly promote that persuasion. Programs which promote a particular religious persuasion should be considered SRE and are unsuitable for instruction outside the provisions for SRE.

5. SRE TEACHERS AS VOLUNTEERS IN SCHOOLS

In general, schools are not to establish chaplaincy positions. When schools use SRE teachers in roles outside the provisions of SRE, such teachers are deemed to be volunteers and are not covered for workers compensation by the Department, but have the same rights and responsibilities as all other volunteers.

In relation to the *Commonwealth National School Chaplaincy Programme*, schools may engage this program as outlined in the Commonwealth guidelines. The programme does not require the use of the term “chaplain” to describe the position.

6. VOLUNTARY STUDENT ACTIVITIES OF A RELIGIOUS NATURE IN SCHOOLS

Voluntary religious activities and prayer groups of any approved persuasion are not part of SRE, but may operate under the auspices and supervision of the principal. Scripture Union (NSW) is recognized as a coordinator of Interscholar Christian Fellowship (ISCF) groups in secondary schools and Scripture Union Primary Age (SUPA) groups for Years 5 and 6 in primary schools.

7. SCHOOL PRAYERS

Schools are permitted to use or to write school prayers. These prayers are to be interdenominational Christian or multi-faith to reflect the diversity of the school community. Consultation with the school community should occur about both the prayer and the types of occasions on which it will be used. Under Section 33 of the Act, parents can object to any general religious education. Students of parents who have indicated this objection, including their child being present when prayers are said, should be supervised in another area of the school.

8. COMMEMORATIONS, RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES AND MULTI-FAITH SERVICES IN SCHOOLS

Commemorations, such as Education Week, Anzac Day, Remembrance Day and school centenaries often contain religious elements. These commemorations should be the product of consultation with the school community and parents/caregivers should be notified of the nature of the ceremony.

Schools are permitted to conduct religious observances as part of GRE to celebrate special occasions such as festivals associated with particular religions.

Parents/caregivers are to be notified of the nature of these services and reminded of their right to object to the inclusion of their child in such observances. Schools will provide alternative activities for students not participating.

Providers of SRE may be invited to participate in particular commemorations and observances.

When schools consider a multi-faith service, religious groups and individuals should not be pressured to compromise their faith for the sake of holding the service.

To assist schools in planning religious celebrations, including Education Week religious services, the Department has developed the following advice:

1. The Department of Education and Training will continue to produce a service for Education Week. This will be an interdenominational Christian service, in recognition of the fact that the majority of students in New South Wales schools still come from a Christian background. It will be designed to be adapted by regions, churches and schools to meet their specific needs.
2. Where there are students who are not permitted by their parents to participate in this Christian service the school could arrange alternative services in conjunction with the appropriate religious leaders.

Multi-faith services

3. Where there is a desire to bring together people of different religions the following principles should apply:

- a) If a multi-faith service is considered appropriate, all religious leaders in the local community should be invited to participate from the very beginning in the preparation of the service.
 - b) Since school populations differ widely in their cultural compositions, multi-faith services are best held in the local school. The broader the area of participation, the more likely it is that there will be pressure on the religious integrity of the individual and the community. Therefore, a local approach is more appropriate than a broader one.
 - c) Any local committee set up for the purpose of developing a multi-faith service by the Department of Education and Training should have adequate representation from all relevant religious groups.
 - d) The word "worship" may create barriers to participation on such occasions. A better title would be "Multi-Faith Order of Service".
 - e) Individual religious groups should not be pressured to compromise their beliefs for the sake of holding such a service. If compromise is necessary, it indicates clearly that the service should not be held.
4. Parents should be fully informed of any planned service and where an objection is made these students are to be supervised in another area of the school.