

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Inter-Church Commission On Religious Education in Schools
(NSW) Inc.

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PARLIAMENT OF NSW – COMMITTEES

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 3

Wednesday, 5th August, 2020

RE: Inquiry into the review of the New South Wales school curriculum

Dear Committee,

Thank you for allowing us to make a submission to this important inquiry.

About us

ICCOREIS (Inter-Church Commission On Religious Education In Schools) was established in 1972 and exists to facilitate consultation and cooperation between member organisations aimed at the support, promotion and ongoing development of quality Special Religious Education (SRE) in government schools in New South Wales, whilst respecting the integrity of each member organisation and other approved providers. It is the peak body for SRE in NSW, representing over 85% of all SRE classes.

The member churches of ICCOREIS are:

Australian Christian Churches (NSW & ACT),
Baptist Union of NSW,
Christian Community Churches of Australia,
C3 Church Australia (NSW),
Dioceses of the Anglican Church of Australia in the Province of NSW,
Dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church in NSW,
Fellowship of Congregational Churches,
Fresh Hope (Churches of Christ in NSW),
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia,
Lutheran Church of Australia, NSW District,
Presbyterian Church of Australia in the State of NSW,
The Salvation Army,
Serbian Orthodox Metropolitanate of Australia and New Zealand
Seventh-day Adventist Church, NSW Conferences,
Uniting Church in Australia NSW/ACT Synod.

Background information about Religious Education

The *Public Instruction Act (1880)*, made allowances for general religious education (Section 7), special religious education (Section 17), and for parents choose for their child not to receive this (Section 18). We believe SRE is a real strength of the NSW public school system, and parent choice has long been an important part of that.

Christian SRE (which ICCOREIS represents) also has inter-disciplinary benefits – for example, English literature frequently draws on Biblical language and images, and an understanding of Christian morals and ethics can provide a significant foundation for the cultural norms and legal systems of the Western world. Having said that, while SRE has historically been majority Christian

teaching (both Protestant and Catholic), in today's multicultural society SRE contributes to celebrating Australia's religious diversity with over 29 faith groups represented, teaching over 420,000 students in over 1500 schools. Goal 1 of the Alice Springs (Mpartnwe) Declaration ("The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity") specifically mentions the role that education plays in promoting "a socially cohesive society that values, respects and appreciates different points of view and cultural, social, linguistic and religious diversity" (p 5)¹, and SRE is an important contributor to this.

Submission regarding the Terms of Reference

Part 3 (c) of the Terms of Reference asks

Whether and to what extent schools should be involved in the 'social and emotional development' of students, as per the Melbourne/Alice Springs Declarations, and growing popularity of 'wellbeing programs' in NSW schools

As mentioned, the Alice Springs (formerly Melbourne) Declaration singles out the importance of a socially cohesive society that acknowledges religious diversity as part of an excellent and equitable education system. As well as mentioning social and emotional development of students, Goal 2 of the Declaration also seeks to support "young Australians to become creative and confident individuals who have a sense of self-worth... that enables them to manage their ... cultural, spiritual ...wellbeing" and who "have a sense of belonging" (p6), as well as "active and informed members of the community who act with moral and ethical integrity" (p8).

While we can't comment on the wellbeing programs that address the social and emotional development of students, SRE plays an important role in enabling students to understand the faith of their family and manage their spiritual (and cultural) wellbeing, learn the values of that faith and develop a sense of belonging to their local faith community. Gross and Rutland (2018) found that Special Religious Education provides the following key benefits to public education:

- 1) Includes an effective values education that empowers student decision making, fosters student action and assigns real student responsibility.
- 2) Strengthens the multicultural fabric of Australian schools.
- 3) Creates a safe place for students to explore deeper questions of faith and belief, including Building Trust, Care, Safety, Respect and Belonging.
- 4) Provides important psychological benefits to students' wellbeing.²

Further, studies from around the world link positive health and wellbeing outcomes with:

- A belief in a higher spiritual being
- Public and private prayer
- Meditation
- Concepts of giving and generosity

¹ https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/final - alice_springs_declaration - 17_february_2020_security_removed.pdf

² Professor Zehavit Gross (Bar-Ilan University and UNESCO Chair in Education for Human Values, Tolerance and Peace) and Professor Emerita Suzanne Rutland OAM (University of Sydney) (2018) *Special Religious Education and its value to contemporary society*.

- Expressing of Gratitude
- Values Education

“All these benefits are consistent with prior literature, our results suggest associations of frequent religious participation in adolescence with greater subsequent psychological wellbeing, character strengths, and lower risks of mental health illness and several health behaviours.” (Chan and VanderWeele, Harvard University, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, September 2018.)³

Similarly, the NSW Department of Education’s *Wellbeing Framework for Schools* outlines the importance of spiritual wellbeing (alongside cognitive, emotional, social and physical) and a “sense of meaning and purpose ... [connecting] to culture, religion or community and includes the beliefs, values and ethics we hold” (p3). SRE provides an important place where “students are connected with their cultural, religious and spiritual backgrounds.” (p 6).⁴

A recent (April 2020) McCrindle survey of 1,003 parents and 401 educators found that balancing curriculum and wellbeing is not a case of either/or, but both/and (p 13). 74% of educators and 49% of parents believe that increased mental health pressures is one of the greatest barriers for students of today to thrive. 50% of educators and 28% of parents also listed a breakdown of traditional forms of community as one of the top 5 barriers for students to thrive (p 19).⁵

The research clearly shows that SRE plays a vital role in student wellbeing and helping students to feel connected to their community through meeting with other students of their faith culture at school, as well as leaders from the local faith community who teach SRE.

Part 4 of the Terms of Reference - Any other related matters.

The Alice Springs Declaration acknowledges the importance of strong partnerships with parents/families and with communities (p10). SRE enables parent choice and allows students to engage with leaders from their faith community and be connected back into the community.

For students and families from different cultural and faith backgrounds particularly, this demonstrates to them that our multicultural society values their culture and beliefs and the education system provides a welcoming place for them to learn to integrate that within the Australian context. Through the education system, SRE allows young people to be taught their beliefs and values in an open and transparent manner consistent with the context of Australian values, and to learn to respect other cultures and beliefs – thus, increasing social cohesion for the good of all.

The Masters Review⁶ reflects on a cluttered curriculum, but refers to this in the context of the various syllabuses and course content. SRE does not add to teacher workload, but frees them up as the lessons are taught by trained volunteers who have been trained in teaching young people

³ Chen & VanderWeele (2018) <https://academic.oup.com/aje/article/187/11/2355/5094534>

⁴ <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/whole-school-approach/wellbeing-framework-for-schools>

⁵ <https://mccrindle.com.au/wp-content/uploads/reports/Education-Future-Report-2020.pdf>

⁶ <https://nswcurriculumreview.nesa.nsw.edu.au/home/siteAreaContent/524abec1-f0f9-4ffd-9e01-2cc89432ad52>

the tenets of their faith. SRE providers work closely with the Department of Education to ensure minimum standards are in place and that SRE in NSW government schools is best practice including regular upskilling, development and evaluation of classroom management, use of age/stage appropriate curricula. Note that a standard SRE class is 30 mins (Primary) / 1 period (High) per week, for usually 30-35 weeks of the school year (i.e. 15 hours per year in Primary schools).

SRE is taught by approved Providers who provide information to parents and schools about the course content. SRE teachers undergo training and WWCC screening. By regulating SRE we can ensure transparency around what is taught and by whom, with best practice and minimum standards. These robust protocols around the delivery of SRE classes

- a) helps to reduce religious bullying and vilification in school communities and broader society as students are taught out in the open, and
- b) serves to mitigate against covert radicalisation of students into extreme manifestations of faith and belief.

This is all about building Social Cohesion through understanding. Students have a safe place to question, explore and discover issues of faith. Education normally resolves things - isolating and driving underground people of faith and culture is not helpful to multiculturalism nor social cohesion.

All separation does is cause pain and heartache and mental health issues. It removes children from a sense of belonging to a place of loneliness. One of the issues to come out of the remote learning period of schooling earlier this year was an increase in students accessing information about religion from extremist websites. An Australian Strategic Policy Institute article on 15 April 2020 states: *"Having a 'captive' audience in lockdown in many Western countries has provided both Islamist and extreme right-wing groups with new online opportunities to contact potential members through a variety of social platforms. A particular target is young people who are now learning online and are more accessible than they would be if they were in school."*⁷

Conclusion

SRE, as a co-curricular activity, delivers parental choice, student wellbeing benefits, community connections, social cohesion and a transparent discussion about religion that works to prevent religious bullying and extremism. It is a strength of the NSW education system that needs to continue to be available in school hours.

We appreciate your time and look forward to your report.

Murray Norman
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on behalf of Inter-Church Commission On Religious Education In Schools (NSW) Inc.

⁷ <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/terrorism-in-the-era-of-covid-19/>