

Special Religious Instruction – the facts

ACCESS ministries welcomes the current debate about the way Special Religious Instruction (SRI) is conducted in government schools, while emphasising the importance of a constructive, well-informed debate based on facts. With these principles in mind we provide the following facts about SRI.

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About Special Religious Instruction (SRI)

What is SRI?

SRI means tuition provided by churches and other religious groups based on their religion's distinctive religious tenets and beliefs. SRI as taught by **ACCESS ministries** is known as Christian religious education (CRE). SRI first commenced in Victorian government schools in the 1870s. In 1905 regulations to allow SRI in government schools were first introduced. In 1950 current arrangements were first brought in. In 2005 the Victorian Government published its 'Review of Education and Training Legislation' White Paper, following extensive public consultation. The White Paper identified widespread consensus that the current practice of teaching SRI in government schools should continue.

SRI is taught in fewer than half of all public primary schools in Victoria. SRI is different from Chaplaincy, which is a national program that provides Chaplains in government schools to give care, advice, comfort and support to students and staff, irrespective of their religious beliefs.

At the core of the SRI system is choice. Parents who do not wish their child to be taught the tenets of a religion can simply excuse them from the weekly 30-minute class. While a matter for the education department, children not attending are treated in a way that does not make them feel excluded and where they can conduct self-directed learning such as homework. Those attending who hold different religious views are respected by instructors who are trained to be culturally and religiously sensitive and not to presume the values of their students. The classroom teacher is always present and is required to report anything inappropriate to the Principal.

Part of the rationale for making faith available in schools is that all faiths play a valuable part in shaping and forming our understanding of who we are as individuals and as members of our society. The values of all faiths inform the way people behave in our society, and values like tolerance, respect, serving others, integrity, looking after the poor, forgiveness, are common to many religions and underpin our legal, health, financial and social welfare sectors. Special Religious Instruction gives children a rounded understanding of their society and is an important part of a broader education.

'General Religious Education' versus 'Special Religious Instruction'

General Religious Education is education about the major forms of religious thought and expression characteristic of Australian society and other societies in the world and is provided by the classroom teacher. Special Religious Instruction is education about a distinctive set of religious tenets and beliefs, eg Buddhism, and is provided by churches and other religious groups and not by the classroom teacher.

What is taught in ACCESS ministries' SRI classes?

ACCESS ministries teaches what Christians believe. Children learn Christian knowledge, skills and attitudes, hear parables, for example about the Good Samaritan, loving your neighbour, turning the other cheek, what it means to be involved in a David and Goliath struggle, doing good to all, and learning about caring for the poor. The values which come from the Christian faith are discussed and especially how these can apply to the everyday lives of children. All **ACCESS ministries** CRE instructors use a curriculum published by **ACCESS ministries** and written by Australian and New Zealand classroom teachers. Curriculum writers have tertiary training in education, teaching experience in both in government and non-government schools, as well as training in theology.

Is SRI compulsory for students?

No, attendance is not compulsory. Instruction is an additional activity and does not contribute to a student's educational assessment. It is not linked to the school's curriculum and students who do not participate are not disadvantaged by not attending. Parents are given the opportunity to decide whether or not their children should attend such instruction. This is undertaken through the provision of preliminary information by the school and the completion of a consent form (GC 566). Parents may withdraw their children from SRI at any time by advising the school of their intention in writing.

Who teaches SRI in schools?

Lessons are taught by 3200 volunteers each week in government schools around Victoria. Volunteers are members of the local community and most are parents of current or past students at the school. Many of **ACCESS ministries'** 3200 volunteers have teacher training, with a high proportion of those are currently registered as teachers. A majority work or have worked as professionals. Volunteers include and have included many eminent Victorians, who are like the other 5.2 million people or 34 per cent of the Australian population who participate in voluntary work and contribute 713 million hours to the community, like Country Fire Authority, State Emergency Services, Red Cross, St John's Ambulance, and charity shop volunteers.

Are religious instruction volunteers trained and accredited?

ACCESS ministries requires all instructors to be trained and accredited to ensure consistent and appropriate instruction and to ensure proselytising does not occur. Accreditation includes a Working with Children Check, registration, training, minimum suitability standards for persons who work or volunteer with children. They are also required to participate in ongoing training every year. Volunteers are trained to be culturally and religiously sensitive and not to presume the values of their students. Then, only when volunteers have been approved by the Minister for Education for the purposes of delivering SRI, are they able to begin volunteering in a school.

By what process does SRI commence at a government school?

Schools are required to permit the delivery of Special Religious Instruction if approached by a duly accredited and approved religious instructor. At the commencement of the religious instruction program or when a child is first enrolled at a school, Principals ensure that the prescribed form (GC 566) or at least the precise form of words contained therein, is used to obtain parent/guardian consent or refusal to allow a child to take part in SRI. Parents continue to have the prerogative of excusing their children from participation. Principals are responsible for managing the notification of parents, completing the necessary administration for obtaining parental consent/refusal for student participation, and for ensuring that adequate supervision is available for students attending, as well as not attending, such instruction.

Do schools have discretion to allow or disallow SRI?

SRI in government schools is authorised by Section 2.2.11 of the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 – see the section of the Act at the end of this document. Schools and school councils don't have any discretion to allow or disallow SRI and must make provision for SRI where an accredited and approved instructor is available.

Some commentators have incorrectly interpreted the word 'may', which appears in Act to mean at the discretion of schools. Rather, the word 'may' in the Act gives discretion to the religious organisation and not the school. This interpretation is supported by the legislative history and context, including Government policy and Parliamentary Hansard, which are relevant considerations under the provisions of the Legislation Interpretation Act 1984.

The background to the enactment of the Act shows that it was clearly intended that the existing practices would remain where religious instruction is able to be taught if there is a provider, subject to parents opting-out.

It has been the case since the early 1870s that religious groups may enter government schools to teach children about their particular faith. In September 2005 the then Victorian Government published its "Review of Education and Training Legislation" Government White Paper, following consultation with the public. It set out the then Government's position and provides background to the enactment of the Act. It stated:

There is also widespread consensus that the current practices relating to religious instruction in government schools should continue, while emphasising the essentially secular nature of the government school system. The Government is strongly supportive of this approach....Regulations allowing religious instruction in government schools were first introduced in 1905. The current arrangements were introduced in 1950 and have received general community acceptance. These should continue.

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What we propose to do: Ensure in the Act that voluntary religious instruction is still able to be taught in government schools and the current arrangements enabling parents to opt out of religious instruction for their children continues.

The then Minister for Education and Training, Ms Kosky stated in the Education and Training Reform Bill second reading speech on 9 February 2006 (emphasis added):

In developing this reform bill we have consulted widely with education and training stakeholders and the broader community over the past year. Informed by the views expressed and our own policy research, this bill represents the aspirations and expectations of the community for an education and training system set in the 21st century ... The bill makes clear in the second chapter that the current provisions for voluntary religious instruction will continue in government schools.

Petitions tabled before the Parliament state the following:

The petition of citizens of Victoria concerned to ensure the continuation of religious instruction in Victorian government schools draws out to the house that under the Bracks Labor government review of education and training legislation, the future of religious instruction in Victorian schools is in question and risks becoming subject to the discretion of local school councils. The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Assembly of Victoria take steps to ensure that there is no change to legislation and the Victorian government schools reference guide ...

Recent controversies

What is proselytising?

Proselytising means converting or attempting to convert someone from one religion, belief, or opinion to another. SRI forbids proselytising. SRI is teaching children the tenets and values of a religion, not seeking to convert them to believe in that religion.

Did ACCESS ministries claim it was seeking to convert children in a 2008 speech?

No. However, **ACCESS ministries** accepts that some parts of the 2008 speech could have better emphasised that **ACCESS ministries** does not and never has condoned proselytising in schools. **ACCESS ministries** understands how people may have interpreted some of the speech otherwise, creating concern around our intentions in schools. This was not our intention.

All that was meant by the speech was that **ACCESS ministries** has an opportunity to teach children what Christians believe and in the case of Chaplaincy, to live out the compassion and care of Jesus. It was not advocating proselytising. **ACCESS ministries** forbids proselytising within schools and we continue to respect the context in which we serve the school community and we honour the privilege that we have in being in schools.

In 2011 the Federal Government conducted an investigation into **ACCESS ministries** and found no evidence that **ACCESS ministries** had tried to convert students in breach of government guidelines.

Is there a sudden spasm of broad-based opposition to SRI?

No. There are a few groups who have always been ideologically opposed to SRI, and they are entitled to express their views. This is evidence of our strong democracy at work. **ACCESS ministries** welcomes the current debate as it provides a further opportunity to reflect on the value of SRI in our community.

A few things have culminated recently to generate publicity to the opposing views of these groups, including a challenge to some aspects of SRI via the Victorian Administrative Appeals Tribunal, a challenge to the Federal Government's National School Chaplaincy Program via the High Court of Australia, and controversy over a speech made by **ACCESS ministries** in 2008.

What safeguards ensure proselytising does not occur?

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development requires all Victorian government schools provide 'appropriate supervision of students during SRI sessions'. Any inappropriate teaching or attempts at proselytising would be immediately reported to the Principal.

ACCESS ministries also provides training to ensure proselytising does not occur and has policies in place which forbid proselytising. Our volunteers are instructed not to proselytise. We have clear reporting structures and will immediately investigate any inappropriate activity identified by a classroom teacher and take the appropriate action. **ACCESS ministries** is reviewing its policies, training and reporting processes to ensure they are operating properly.

Is it appropriate to teach religion in schools; aren't they meant to be secular?

Victorian law (Education and Training Reform Act 2006) states that education in Government schools is secular with one exception – the teaching of SRI during school hours. It is not compulsory for students to attend SRI classes and parents can excuse them from attending.

Does teaching SRI conflict with inquiry based learning?

SRI educates children on religious tenets and beliefs and teaches values like sharing, giving, caring for others, sacrifice, mercy and the impact of their behaviours on others. These values are shared by most people in our community and underpin Australia's legal, health, administrative and social welfare sectors. SRI is not taught in a dogmatic way and volunteer instructors are guided by a code of conduct which explicitly requires them to respect other points of view and not to assume the values of their students.

Does the opt-out system discriminate against children?

Arrangements for children not attending SRI is a matter for schools and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, however, **ACCESS ministries** understands children not attending are treated in a way that does not make them feel excluded, and where they can conduct self-directed learning such as homework or work on a current school project.

If a parent feels their child has not had an appropriate level of supervision or treatment, **ACCESS ministries** would encourage them to raise their concerns immediately with the individual school.

While the practical implementation of the opt-out system is the responsibility of the schools, **ACCESS ministries** has an interest in the proper conduct of the SRI program and should we become aware of any unfair or disadvantageous treatment of students who opt out it would discuss these with the school and/or report these directly to the Department.

Does ACCESS ministries' monopoly of SRI reflect the faith makeup of Victoria?

The majority of Victorians describe themselves as being of faith and of associating with Christianity. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Yearbook 2009–10, Chapter 1301.0, 18.7 per cent of Australians describe themselves as being of 'no religion', while 69.5 per cent describe themselves as being 'of religion', including 63.9 per cent who identify with Christianity and 5.6 per cent who identify with a non-Christian religion. These statistics show that of Australians who describe themselves of faith, 92 per cent are Christian.

SRI is not taught in all Victorian schools with availability dependent on the capacity of religious organisations to make instructors available. While a majority of existing programs are taught by **ACCESS ministries** this reflects both our ability to make instructors available and that Christians make up 92 per cent of people 'of faith'. SRI is also provided by Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Baha'i, Islam and other faiths and we encourage these other faiths to reach out to schools with faith-based teaching as we have and will continue to do. Recent voices of opposition to SRI do not come from non-Christian faiths; there is great respect and cooperation between the SRI providers of all faiths. We occasionally meet together, share ideas and support one another in training of volunteer instructors. We respect each other.

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Is SRI taught at the expense of general religious education or other subjects?

Victorian laws (The Education and Training Reform Act 2006) do not prevent the inclusion of general religious education in the curriculum of a Government school, in addition to the teaching of SRI by outside organisations. **ACCESS ministries** encourages the teaching of general religious education, as it is another way to teach children the place that religion has in our history, our institutions and our society generally. It is also important to put SRI teaching in the context of only being taught for 30 minutes each week. The teaching of the school curriculum is a matter for schools and the education department.

Is ACCESS ministries a new form of evangelical Christianity?

No. **ACCESS ministries** is not a church in its own right but is a coalition of 12 Christian churches. These 12 churches do not represent a homogenous or narrow form of Christianity but rather, have diverse views and different traditions and styles. They do all have one common faith - Christianity.

ACCESS ministries is the trading name of the Council for Christian Education in Schools, which is made up of the Anglican Church, Australian Christian Churches, Baptist Union, Christian Brethren Fellowships of Victoria, Christian Reformed Churches, Churches of Christ in Australia, CRC International, Lutheran Church, Presbyterian Church, Salvation Army, Uniting Church, Wesleyan Methodist Church.

ACCESS ministries SRI instructors come from these 12 denominations and many other Christian Churches including Catholic, Orthodox, and independent churches.

Is ACCESS ministries using government funding?

ACCESS ministries is only allowed to use government funding for the purposes for which it was provided, ie SRI. State government funding contributes a small proportion of our total funding to support SRI, covering for the administration of our SRI volunteers and equipping our volunteers. **ACCESS ministries** receives other funding through its own commercial enterprises and fund raising activities and can use this other funding at its own discretion.

Attachment 1 - Education and Training Reform Act 2006

Act No. 24/2006 (Extract)

2.2.10 Education in Government schools to be secular

- (1) Except as provided in section 2.2.11, education in Government schools must be secular and not promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect.
- (2) Sub-section (1) does not prevent the inclusion of general religious education in the curriculum of a Government school.
- (3) A Government school teacher must not provide religious instruction other than the provision of general religious education in any Government school building.
- (4) In this section "**general religious education**" means education about the major forms of religious thought and expression characteristic of Australian society and other societies in the world.

2.2.11 SRI

- (1) SRI may be given in a Government school in accordance with this section.
- (2) If SRI is given in a Government school during the hours set apart for the instruction of the students—
 - (a) the persons providing the SRI must be persons who are accredited representatives of churches or other religious groups and who are approved by the Minister for the purpose;
 - (b) the SRI must be given on the basis of the normal class organisation of the school except in a school where the Minister authorises some other basis to be observed having regard to—
 - (i) the particular circumstances of a school or schools; or
 - (ii) the preparation or conduct of a pageant, special event or celebration of a festival in a school or schools;
 - (c) attendance for the SRI is not to be compulsory for any student whose parents desire that he or she be excused from attending.
- (3) The Minister may give an authorisation under sub-section (2) in respect of the preparation or conduct of a particular class of pageant, special event or celebration of a festival generally to all schools, to a class or classes of school or to a specific school.
- (4) Nothing in this section prevents any Government school building from being used for any purpose on days other than school days or at hours on school days other than the hours set apart for the instruction of the students.
- (5) In this section "**SRI**" means instruction provided by churches and other religious groups and based on distinctive religious tenets and beliefs.