

Special Religious Instruction in State Primary Schools

Key FIRIS points in the discussion

The issues

- Children are being segregated based on religion in our State primary schools. This is distressing for some children.
- Separating children based on their family's religion (or lack of religion) promotes the development of prejudice within children.
- SRI does not provide an education about Christianity, but rather is a formal indoctrination in the opinions of Christian faith, taught by people selected for their ideological commitment and religious passions.
- Children are being instructed in an unassessed program by unqualified volunteers, many of whom have an anti educational and evangelical agenda.
- We believe that instruction in a particular religion belongs in the Church or in the home, and that school should provide an unbiased education about different religions and worldviews, provided by qualified teachers.
- Our State education system is supposed to be secular (defined as not promoting one particular religion) and yet the arrangements clearly favour the Christian program.

Although it is said that the program is available to many different faiths, 96% of SRI is provided by ACCESS ministries, because smaller faith groups simply don't have the resources to put volunteers into schools across the State, so it does not fairly cater to non-Christian families it is "majority privilege"

The form given to parents (Form No. GC 566) also clearly promotes the Christian program, even linking it to the VELs, thus creating the appearance that it is part of the school curriculum (it is not part of the curriculum), it is also presented during the compulsory school day, pressuring parents to participate for fear of being "different".

- The revised SRI policy states that principals must "**ensure core curriculum is not delivered to non-attendees during the period of SRI**". While this opens the door to schools doing any activity during SRI that is not "core curriculum", the reality is that in most schools this means the students are taken out of class to read a book. This is not a productive use of school time, it is designed to promote religion, and amounts to over 100 hours of primary education that children are missing out on, while church volunteers are exercising their "rights" to instruct children in religion. This shouldn't be "during school".

FIRIS (Fairness in Religions in School) Stated Aims

FIRIS is a parent-run campaign which is seeking to find a more equitable and less divisive system of religious education in our State schools.

Our aims are as follows:

We believe that state schools in Victoria should:

- 1. Maintain an inclusive school curriculum that does not require any student to withdraw from class on account of different religious beliefs*
- 2. Formally cease the practice of volunteer-run special religious instruction (SRI) during school hours*
- 3. Follow an objective, fair and balanced comparative syllabus for education about religions and beliefs*
- 4. Treat all religious organisations who wish to use the school facilities outside of the school day with transparent and equitable policies*

Legislative changes sought

- We seek a change to the **Victorian Government Education Act 2006** (see relevant section attached) to remove **s2.2.11 *Special Religious Instruction*** in its entirety. This would leave in place the provision of **s2.2.10 (2)** which allows for “the inclusion of general religious education in the curriculum of a Government school”.
- Alternatively, a change to s2.2.11 to require that where SRI is provided, that it is scheduled outside of normal school hours (as currently occurs in the Australian Capital Territory).

This issue has generated considerable community discussion in recent times.

The legal case will be heard in VCAT on 12 December 2011, arguing that the current arrangements for SRI are discriminatory.

The real solution like in changes to this legislation and an honest evaluation of the real motivations and outcomes of why we have Churches lobbying to keep SRI in schools.

Isn't Religious Freedom is not advanced by state legislation to allow missionary programs in school.