

Special Religious Education (SRE) in NSW Government schools

Information for parents & Caregivers

What is Special Religious Education (SRE)?

Special Religious Education (also known as 'scripture') is instruction in the beliefs and practices of a religious persuasion by paid or volunteer representatives of that persuasion.

There is **no minimal participation rate** under which SRE is dropped at school level. Any NSW public school approached by a SRE provider **must accommodate** their wish to deliver SRE. This means that SRE can run with the participation of a few students while hundreds of other students are to be given no instruction.

SRE is **not the same** as General Religious Education (GRE) which is education about the world's major religions. GRE is taught by NSW Department of Education teachers using curriculum and lesson materials approved and authorised by the NSW Department of Education.

Who provides SRE?

SRE is delivered by religious organisations approved by the NSW Minister for Education to be '**SRE providers**'. There are over 100 SRE providers in NSW.

The list of approved SRE providers can be found on the Department's 'Curriculum' page under 'Religion and Ethics':

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/curriculum>

SRE providers may be local churches (e.g. Bathurst Evangelical Church), larger church organisations (e.g. the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle), or other organisations (e.g. the NSW Board of Jewish Education).

SRE **cannot be** taught by on-duty professional teachers employed by the NSW Department of Education.

'**SRE instructors**' are **not approved** by the NSW Department of Education. The people entering NSW Government school classrooms to deliver SRE are approved and authorised by SRE providers only.

Combined arrangements

In order to employ SRE instructors, various SRE providers may group together to form a 'combined arrangement'. These 'combined arrangements' may be associations, incorporations or SRE boards.

It is important to note that associations, incorporations or SRE boards representing a 'combined arrangement' **are not** SRE providers.

Each member church or denomination of the combined arrangement must, however, be an approved SRE provider.

Combined arrangements can make it hard to find who to deal with to get information because one or more of the member churches may authorise the SRE instructor/s and others may authorise the SRE curriculum.

Principals **must be able** to tell you how to contact the local representative of the SRE provider.



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What happens during SRE?

During SRE, the NSW Department of Education **suspends** its own curriculum and formal school activities and students are divided up according to the beliefs of their parents/caregivers and placed in either a SRE class, an ethics class (if available) or in Alternative Meaningful Activities (AMA; also known as 'non-scripture' or 'non-special religious education' or 'non-SRE').

Between 20 and 40 hours (**3-6 school days**) a year are allocated to SRE, during which time students in AMA are not allowed to receive any formal curriculum education.

During this time, students in SRE are exposed to lessons which the Minister for Education and the Department of Education have **no control** over.

Once approval has been given to a SRE provider to deliver SRE, the provider has sole responsibility for developing the materials delivered by its instructors.

A class teacher **does not** need to be present during SRE.

What are your rights?

You have the right to say NO to SRE

The NSW *Education Act 1990* (Section 33) and the Department's *Religious Education Implementation Procedures* give you the right to **say NO** to your child taking part in SRE.

You can do this by writing 'No religion' on the enrolment form and/or telling the school in writing **at any time** that you do not want your child to attend SRE.

If you say **NO** your child should be placed in Alternative Meaningful Activities (AMA; also known as 'non-scripture' or 'non-special religious education' or 'non-SRE'). Alternatively, after you have told the school that you have said **NO** you can request to enrol your child in Special Education in Ethics (commonly known as 'ethics' or SEE) *if it is available at the school*.

Please note that 'ethics' is currently only available in some primary schools. There is no approved provider of 'ethics' for high schools, so the only alternative to SRE in high schools is AMA.

What FIRIS has learned

- **If you want to say NO to SRE, you must do it in writing**

Although it says on the enrolment form that filling in the section about SRE is optional, FIRIS has learned that if you leave the section blank you may find that your child will be placed in SRE.

FIRIS recommends that if you do not want your child to take part in SRE, you should notify the school in writing. You can use our **SRE Non-participation Letter**.

FIRIS also recommends that you follow up the non-participation letter with the principal or the SRE coordinator at the school and make sure your child is not enrolled in a SRE class.

- **Do not assume your decision will be respected**

FIRIS frequently receives complaints from parents/caregivers who have opted their children out of SRE but who have later discovered that their child has been placed in SRE without their consent.

Despite the fact that the Department's Procedures state that students are to continue in the same arrangement as the previous year unless parents/caregivers request a change, FIRIS also receives complaints that some schools place already opted-out students in SRE at the beginning of the new school year.



- **Do not assume your child will be treated fairly**

FIRIS has learned that some schools try and make the alternatives to SRE uncomfortable for students and their families, with some schools even treating students the same way as students who are in trouble or being punished.

When enrolling your child in a NSW Government school, **you have the right to ask the principal what arrangements are made for students who will not be participating in SRE.**

The Department's procedures state that AMA cannot involve academic instruction or engagement with the formal school curriculum. SRE providers want this because they see a 'conflict of choice' for some parents and students when deciding whether to take part in SRE.

What you can do

- ✓ Say NO to your child taking part in SRE in writing. You can use our **SRE Non-participation Letter**
- ✓ Remind the school at the beginning of each year **in writing** that your child is not to be placed in SRE and keep a record of the communication. It is best to send the letter as an attachment to an email to the principal.
- ✓ Find out when SRE is held (you can use our **Request for SRE Information Letter** if required) and remind your child that s/he is not to attend SRE.
- ✓ Ask your child at the end of the day when SRE was held what s/he did during the time set aside for SRE.

If you choose to have your child placed in Alternative Meaningful Activities (AMA):

- ✓ Ask that your child be allowed to engage in self-directed activities to ensure that AMA is not seen by your child as a punishment for not attending SRE or SEE.
- ✓ If the school does not allow self-directed activities, ask the school to ensure that AMA involves meaningful activities such as reading, private study and completing homework.

You have the right to say NO to other religious activities in the school

The NSW *Education Act 1990* (Section 33) and the NSW Department of Education's *Religious Education Implementation Procedures* give you the right to say **NO** to your child taking part in other religious activities, including school prayers, religious observances, multi-faith services and commemorations.

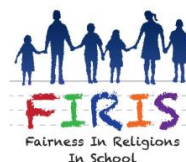
If you say **NO** your child should be engaged in supervised alternative activities in another area of the school.

What FIRIS has learned

FIRIS has learned that some schools **do not** take this right seriously.

What you can do

- ✓ Withdraw your child from SRE. (You can use our **SRE Non-participation Letter** because it provides you with a simple way of including this request).
- ✓ Ask your child where s/he is placed during such activities. If he or she says that they are made to participate in such activities write to the principal and inform him/her of your rights as stated in the Procedures.
- ✓ Encourage the school to make such activities inclusive of all students.



Your child has the right not to be exposed to SRE

The NSW *Education Act 1990* [Section 32(5)] and the NSW Department of Education's *Religious Education Implementation Procedures* make it clear that students participating in SRE are to be separated from other children while the SRE class is held. This means that students participating in SRE, SEE or AMA are not to be located in the same physical space.

What FIRIS has learned

One of the most common complaints received by FIRIS is that students who are not taking part in SRE are made to remain at the back of the SRE classroom where they are exposed to SRE lessons.

What you can do

- ✓ Withdraw your child from SRE in writing. (You can use our **SRE Non-participation Letter** because it reminds principals of this requirement.)
- ✓ Ask your child where s/he is placed during the time set aside for SRE/SEE/AMA. If they are in AMA and remain in the same physical space as SRE students write to the principal and inform them of your rights as stated in the Act and the Procedures. Request that your child not be located in a space where they can be exposed to the content of SRE classes in any way.

You have the right to information

The *Religious Education Implementation Procedures* state that when you are enrolling your child you have the right:

- to know the SRE options at the school
- to know what arrangements are made for students whose parents/caregivers do not wish to send their child to SRE or SEE.

At all other times you have the right:

- to know how SRE will be organised each year and which religious organisations will be providing SRE for particular classes or year groups
 - **NOTE:** This information should be provided through enrolment information, the school website and the school newsletter.
- to access a website provided by a SRE provider which contains SRE lesson content or at least a program outline and curriculum scope and sequence documents
- to ask the principal for the name and contact details of the approved provider or their local representative
- to ask SRE providers for information about SRE lesson content and to be provided with information about the content of lessons.

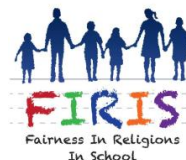
The school should also communicate to the school community any changes to SRE/SEE/AMA throughout the school year.

What FIRIS has learned

FIRIS has found very little evidence that schools provide parents/caregivers with clear and accurate information regarding SRE in enrolment information, school websites and school newsletters.

FIRIS has also found, particularly in high schools, that parents are often directed to make enquires to SRE boards, associations or incorporations, rather than the appropriate SRE provider.

FIRIS conducted an audit of policy compliance by SRE providers in August 2016 and found that over 60% of SRE providers did not have their curriculum available at the website address provided by the Department.



In response to this audit, the Department informed FIRIS that SRE providers do not have to make their curriculum available on **'their'** website, but rather on **'a'** website.

Although the application to become an approved SRE provider requires SRE providers 'to provide details of where the curriculum scope and sequence is available online', FIRIS is concerned that the Department does not readily provide this information to parents and caregivers.

What you can do

- ✓ Request that the principal provides you with the information you are entitled to. You can use our **Request for SRE Information Letter**.
 - **NOTE:** If there is a SRE board, association or incorporation, ask the principal to provide you with the contact details of the approved SRE provider/s who are authorising the SRE instructor/s *as well as* the contact details of the SRE provider/s authorising the curriculum used by the SRE instructor.
- ✓ Request from the SRE provider/s the address of the website where they have their curriculum, if the website address provided by the Department does not take you to the curriculum.
- ✓ If there is a SRE board, incorporation or association representing a 'combined arrangement' supplying SRE instructors at the school, ask the principal to provide you with the contact details of the approved SRE provider/s authorising the SRE instructor/s as well as the SRE provider authorising the curriculum used by the SRE instructor.
- ✓ Send this information to FIRIS so we can maintain our records about what is happening in NSW Government schools.

You have the right to complain

You have the right to complain to the principal about the actions of a SRE instructor or SRE provider, as well as as inappropriate SRE lesson content.

You can also complain if you think a school is not implementing policies and procedures correctly.

The Complaints Handling Policy is located at:

<https://cms.det.nsw.edu.au/policy-library/policies/complaints-handling-policy?refid=285776>

Contact FIRIS if you need help preparing your complaint.

Other things FIRIS has learned

SRE instructors and others may try to convert your child

There are many ways your child can be exposed to representatives of religious organisations who want to convert them outside of the SRE classroom.

The religious lobby group, the Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools (NSW) Incorporated (ICCOREIS), has encouraged SRE instructors to engage in the following activities:

- playground duty
- school camps and excursions
- extra welfare, support and attention to students, particularly students at risk and those needing assistance with learning
- peer support and personal development programs
- co-curricular activities including sport, drama and musicals, dance and rock festivals, excursions, school formals, clubs, social activities, carnivals and other 'extras'.



A 2016 advertisement for a SRE Instructor for Kotara High School, employed by the Generate Ministries-backed Kotara Christian Education Association Incorporated, listed as a possible job requirement speaking 'to Students in the Playground to encourage them to attend SRE'.

An article published on the Generate Ministries website "Why SRE Teachers Must Go on School Camps" encouraged SRE instructors to "go on school camps as a matter of priority" because they 'fast-forward' ministries in schools.

FIRIS is very concerned that the suggested activities of a SRE teacher as mentioned above enable contact between SRE instructors and your children without your knowledge and without your informed consent.

This unmonitored access to students outside of the SRE classroom increases the foreseeable risk that members of religious organisations will attempt to encourage your child to attend their SRE program and/or their voluntary student activity of a religious nature and/or their external religious programs (e.g. youth group) and/or their place of worship.

The Department has informed FIRIS that SRE instructors can volunteer for other school activities and that "it is a local school decision as to what activities volunteers can engage in."

However, the Department of Education does not provide a policy or procedural statement that volunteers are not to attempt to convert students or to encourage them to engage in religious activities both in and out of schools, including attending SRE.

What you can do

- ✓ Use our **SRE Non-participation Letter** which provides you with the opportunity to state that you want the principal to:

"...ensure that **no** adult, including any representative of the NSW Department of Education, a school chaplain, a SRE instructor acting in any capacity, including as a volunteer, makes contact with the student named above during school hours, including during recesses and lunchtime, or during any school-authorized activity, such as a school camp, and attempts to discuss his or her religious beliefs or the religious beliefs of others with the intention to convert the student named above to that adult's religion persuasion, denomination, faith or belief.

This includes attempts to recruit the student named above into any activity of a religious nature, including a SRE class or program, a 'voluntary student activity of a religious nature' (such as a lunchtime prayer group, Bible study group), an external church youth group or general church attendance."

SRE providers cannot be trusted to do the right thing

The Queensland Department of Education and Training looked at the Sydney Anglican's *Connect* SRE ('scripture') lesson materials, also used in NSW, and found that they contained material that:

- is "inappropriate for the target age group": topics include murder, prostitution and animal sacrifice
- "may encourage undesirable child safe behaviours", such as the keeping of secrets and the formation of 'special friendships' with adults, likened to "possible grooming behaviour"
- has "the potential to affect the social and emotional wellbeing of particular students"
- poses risks to health and safety, such as mixing bleach and cordial
- is aimed at converting students to Christianity.

A copy of the full report is available at:

<http://statements.qld.gov.au/Content/MediaAttachments/2016/pdf/Review%20of%20RI%20Connect%20materials%20August%202016.pdf>

Regardless of the possible willingness of the developers of the Connect SRE materials to make amendments, the problem in NSW is that they are under no obligation to do so.



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The NSW Minister for Education and the Department have no control over the contents of SRE lessons.

The developers of the Connect curriculum can also **not guarantee** that the questionable materials will not be used by any of the 100+ SRE providers in NSW. Other SRE providers may choose to continue to authorise the material.

The Department does not make evidence-based policy decisions

In 2012 a NSW parliamentary committee recommended that the Department of Education collect and publish data each year on the number of students participating in SRE, SEE and for those students who do not attend either.

The committee said that without such data it is **not possible** to definitively determine student demand for either option, nor can the number of students who are not participating in either SRE and SEE be accurately known. They saw data collection as essential to ensuring **good evidence-based decision making and policy development**.

The NSW Minister for Education responded by saying that he supported the recommendation in principle, but the Department of Education has not implemented this recommendation.

It is unknown how many non-SRE, non-SEE students have their valuable school time wasted to accommodate these programs.

The Department suspends some of its own policies to run SRE

Although the Department of Education states that the Religious Education Policy and its Implementation Procedures should be read in conjunction with all other Department policies, FIRIS has learnt that the spirit of some important policies do not apply while SRE is being held.

The Controversial Issues in Schools Policy and its Implementation Procedures state that:

- “Schools are neutral grounds for rational discourse and objective study. They are not arenas for opposing political views or ideologies.”
- discussion of controversial issues is not intended to advance the interest of any group, political or otherwise.
- schools are not places for recruiting into partisan groups.

However, the Controversial Issues in Schools Policy Implementation Procedures make it clear that the Policy does not apply to SRE instructors.

In addition, the Department of Education has written to FIRIS and said:

“SRE...volunteers may inform the students who participate in that SRE class...of related extra-curricular activities including local church groups.”

This means that while SRE is being held, NSW Government schools are ‘mission fields’ for churches to advance their interests.

The Department of Education does not include this information in its Religious Education Policy or its Religious Education Implementation Procedures.

The Department of Education has also not told FIRIS what other policies and procedures are suspended during the SRE timeslot in NSW Government schools.

SRE instructors are told to join P&Cs to ‘wield more power’

At an event run by the Anglican Church of Australia, Ms Sue Sneddon, the current executive officer of ICCOREIS and associate member of Hunter Christian SRE, was recorded as saying that she “gets her RE teachers to get onto the P&C to wield more power in the school...”



What you can do

- ✓ Become an active member of your child's school's P&C Committee and"
 - instate a 'Declaration of Conflict of Interest' as part of proceedings at your P&C meetings, and ask any candidates for an executive position on the P&C to state if they belong to a church or are involved in an evangelical group.
 - ask the P&C or school council to review the school's procedures for implementing the Department's relevant policies and procedures.
 - ask your principal to ensure that all SRE instructors at the school represent approved SRE providers listed on the DE's current list of approved SRE providers.
 - ask the principal to ensure all member churches of SRE organisations representing a combined arrangement, such as a SRE board, incorporation or association, are approved SRE providers.

Other things you can do

- You can read all of the relevant policies, procedures and supporting documents related to SRE and ethics at:
<https://education.nsw.gov.au/curriculum/religion-and-ethics>
- You can read other important policies and procedures, such as the Controversial Issues in Schools Policy and its Implementation Procedures. There are found at:
<https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library>
- You can contact the Department of Education if you have any questions:
Special Religious Education and Special Education in Ethics Officer
Phone: (02) 92445484
Email: srecontact@det.nsw.edu.au
- You can write a letter to your local Member of Parliament, copying in the NSW Minister for Education and the NSW Premier.
- You can follow our campaign on Facebook.
- You can keep FIRIS informed of your actions and ask us for help if you need it.
- You can donate to FIRIS: BSB: 633000 Account: 145193314
- **You can help FIRIS with our campaign** - ideas, media contacts and resources are welcome!

Contact us

Fairness in Religions in School

PO Box 2296, Dangar, NSW, 2309

Email: religionsinschool@gmail.com

Website: <http://religionsinschool.com>

Facebook: Fairness in Religions in School

Twitter: @secularschools



This information sheet has been created in accordance with FIRIS' understanding of all materials available at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/curriculum/religion-and-ethics> accessed on 19 January 2017.



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