

Scripture Guidelines in NSW are Sound: Providers

Interview between Stephen O'Doherty and Murray Norman Wednesday, 14 March 2018 – Open House with Stephen O'Doherty

Voiceover: Welcome to the Open House podcast. Conversations exploring life, faith and hope with Stephen O'Doherty.

Stephen: Scripture in schools, Special Religious Education as it's called, often controversial and often at this time of year you get the argy-bargy between a particularly vocal anti-SRE group and the providers of religion in education arguing the toss over how it's administered in schools right throughout Australia. And in NSW in particular in the last few weeks there have been complaints that some schools are not administering SRE properly, concerns that some principals are not actually doing their job of ensuring that all kids have the opportunity to opt out of scripture. And in fact the rules say they have to give you the opportunity to opt in, not just opt out and you need to be given an alternative. The word from the scripture providers is chill, there are some very clear guidelines that govern the way SRE is taught in schools. And those guidelines are being adhered to and when they're not it's certainly not in the interests of those who provide scripture in schools. Murray Norman is the head of the group of church providers of Christian SRE and is also the General Manager at Presbyterian Youth.

Murray: There's actually 430,000 students every week participating in Special Religious Education and 11,000 teachers. Basically...

Stephen: So this is in NSW we're speaking, yeah.

Murray: This is in NSW. So there's 2,100 schools in NSW so you're talking about a lot of students in a lot of schools with a lot of volunteer teachers. And in a vast majority of schools we're working really well with the schools and the operation of Special Religious Education is happening excellently. That being said, in a number of schools we actually find that people haven't actually followed the rules or they've departed from that. In anywhere that people aren't actually following the enrolment rules, we actually find that that actually causes some issues.

Stephen: Either one way or the other. So let's go over those rules briefly again. What can the parent expect from the school about Special Religious Education under the rules in NSW?

Murray: So under the rules in NSW, every parent on enrolment signs in and has the opportunity to enrol their child in Special Religious Education. And at that time we're currently with the Government and providing information about what's in those classes parents can find out there. If they're not quite sure, what happens is the principal actually gets back to them at a later stage with a second form and actually says look there's actually other options in the school, here they are, can you get back to us and just let us know what you'd like your child enrolled in. In some schools...

Stephen: Yeah they call that non-scripture.

Murray: That's right. In some schools, Primary Ethics run Special Education in Ethics and people can actually opt out of attending Special Religious Education classes and attend that. So there's a number of choices but at all times it's actually the parents' choice what their child actually attends.

Stephen: And it's an opt in or an opt out? Sounds like you're saying it's an opt in.

Murray: So everywhere the parents actually choose where they actually want their child to actually attend, so the parent actually has the choice. It is actually the principal's responsibility if the parent doesn't actually fill out that form to actually engage with their school community and actually engage with the parents so they can actually find out where the parents actually want their children sent.

Stephen: Now that means that schools can't say we're just not offering religious education we don't believe in it, because the rules say where churches are prepared to provide it the school must participate, so we've had that discussion. But there are other cases and they've been highlighted recently where some principals have said look we're going to put everybody into Special Religious Education, no one gets to opt out, or if you're going to opt out you've got to come and talk to us first because essentially the school is sending a message we don't want you to opt out. Now while that's in your interests as churches, what I'm hearing you saying is that you don't like that either.

Murray: No, one of the things we need to be really, really careful with, in NSW we have the amazing opportunity to go in and teach young people about faith. Part of the responsibility in doing that is to make sure we operate under the rules. So one of the things we are working really hard with our volunteer teachers and with schools, is we need to operate under the rules, we need to actually work with the Department, we actually need to follow the processes, and parents actually get to choose. It's not actually for the churches or the SRE providers or the principals to choose where they go, it's up to the parents. And what we're keen to do is encourage everyone to be following that, and if there's any parents or any school that's got a problem they actually need to get onto their provider. They need to actually get on and actually work that through because we need to make sure that we're doing a really good job, that we're good citizens as we actually engage in the community...

Stephen: Indeed.

Murray: ... and we actually stand up for both sides and make sure that this operates really well.

Stephen: And that includes that people who are taking scripture classes, that they have got working with children checks and that they've received training from the provider who they're working with.

Murray: Yeah, so definitely we actually train and I as the representative for the Presbyterian Church actually have to sign off each year that every Presbyterian teacher actually has training, they use a curriculum, there's actually information going out. We actually have to sign off that all our teachers have that training. And one of the things that we actually encourage, my wife teaches SRE in a local school, she actually gets a list of kids that are actually there and a number of those kids on the list weren't actually designated to actually be in her class. So she actually went and had a chat to the principal and the principal actually got onto the parent and resolved it and that's really what we're wanting teachers to do, to take that level of responsibility and make sure that we're doing the right thing by parents and students.

Stephen: Mm. Where can parents go to find out more?

Murray: So the best place to go is a Facebook page we've set up. It's called Christian SRE. If you've got questions you can actually go there and you can actually ask questions. And there's a lot of information about how Special Religious Education works, where you can get information. You might be interested in teaching. So there's a whole lot of information that you can get there and engaged and be encouraged and pray for what's actually happening right across the State.

Stephen: Murray Norman thank you.

Murray: Thank you very much Stephen, great to talk to you.

Voiceover: Discover more Open House podcasts at openhousecommunity.com.au.