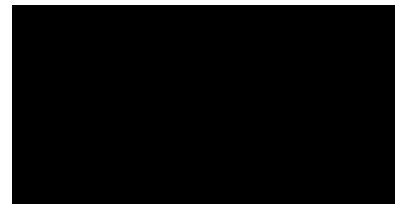


Jude Hennessy  
Honorary Secretary  
Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools  
c/o CCD Polding Centre, Level 6, 133 Liverpool Street  
SYDNEY, NSW 2000



11 February 2019

Dear Jude,

### **Misleading ICCOREIS Publications**

My children attend a NSW public primary school. By the end of Year 6 they and their peers will have lost about one full term of classes in the NSW syllabus because all public schools stop for Special Religious Education (SRE), and its alternatives, by Section 32 of the Education Act 1990 and related amendments.

I'm writing to point out errors in an ICCOREIS media release and in two Christian SRE flyers which name ICCOREIS. The media release and flyers are currently linked to the ICCOREIS website for public viewing. These errors and various statements in both are misleading as to the actual situation of SRE in NSW.

Please refer first to the ICCOREIS media release "SRE comes of age, enjoys massive support" of 13 June 2018<sup>1</sup>. I've attached a copy. It states incorrectly that NSW parents currently opt-in to SRE. Until Term 1 of this year<sup>2</sup> schools have placed all children in SRE by default unless parents gave written instruction to not do so. The onus has been on parents to deliberately remove children from SRE, or in other words; to opt-out. SRE has always run on this opt-out basis, except when unintentionally made opt-in for 2014 only, and was doing so at the date of this media release. To say that "every student in SRE is there with their parents' consent" is misleading: it would be more accurate to say that consent has been implied from parental silence.

The media release cites an unidentified recent independent survey that found 71% of parents (i.e. *all* parents) choose SRE. To substantiate this finding the release should state the survey's title, author, date, and method. Without this, the headline that SRE "enjoys massive support" has little weight because it is contradicted by other research on SRE in the public domain. I'll detail for you some findings from two lots of such research.

Student participation in SRE in public primary schools in 2015 was 71%, as reported by ARTD Consultants in Section 2.4 of the *2015 Review of Special Religious Education and Special Education in Ethics in NSW Government Schools*<sup>3</sup>. That's one part of the picture. Here are ARDT's other findings on SRE participation:

- About 70% of secondary students do not attend SRE<sup>4</sup>
- SRE attendance is falling in 48% of all schools and is steady in 44%
- SRE attendance is increasing in 8% of all schools – mainly due to school growth

Because of the opt-out basis of SRE up until now, it cannot be said that student participation rates equate to parental support for SRE. On page 63 in Section 4.1.2 ARDT makes the same point: "...an opt-out process has been followed in NSW for student participation in SRE. ...An opt-in process, where parents indicate their approval for their child/ren's participation in SRE before they can attend classes, could be expected to decrease the level of participation in SRE, through changing the default position".

So, what is the actual level of parental support for SRE? In 2016, the year ARDT presented its report to the NSW Government, there were 477,259 primary and 306,877 secondary mainstream students in NSW public schools<sup>5</sup>. Based on the primary and secondary participation rates ARDT found, we see that about 55% of *all* public school students did SRE in 2016. Even if one does assume that every student participating in SRE that year was doing so with parental consent; ICCOREIS's claim in mid-2018 that "71% of parents choose SRE" is problematic. But if you acknowledge the historical reality of SRE as a default from which students have had to be opted-out by their parents, then your claimed level of parental support for SRE is laughable – especially as only several years earlier SRE classes were found to be shrinking in about half of all NSW public schools.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iccoreis.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/iccoreis-media-release-2018-06-13.pdf>, accessed 11-Feb-19

<sup>2</sup> <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/associated-documents/REimplementproced.pdf>, accessed 8-Feb-19

<sup>3</sup> [https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/strategies-and-reports/media/documents/2015\\_review\\_sre\\_see.pdf](https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/strategies-and-reports/media/documents/2015_review_sre_see.pdf), accessed 8-Feb-19

<sup>4</sup> While "caution should be used with these figures, particularly for secondary schools... evidence from the case study interviews supports the findings" (p28).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.teach.nsw.edu.au/documents/2015%20-%20DGS14-253-Website%20Enrolment%20Information.pdf>, accessed 8-Feb-19

It is unlikely that there was sudden surge in SRE participation of at least 16% across all public schools in the time between ARDT's research in 2015 and the unidentified survey that ICCOREIS references in its 13 June 2018 media release. If ICCOREIS has credible evidence of such a surge then please share it.

In research for the report *Faith and Belief in Australia*<sup>6</sup> (May 2017) McCrindle Research Pty Ltd asked a representative sample of Australians<sup>7</sup> "How much do you value the work of the church and Christian organisations in each of the following areas?". McCrindle found that when it came to "exploring faith and spirituality (e.g. special religious education in schools)":

- 19% of the sample extremely valued this work
- 30% somewhat valued it
- 20% slightly valued it
- 31% did not value it at all

Perhaps you'll agree that only the 19% of people who regarded SRE as extremely valuable would've been particularly upset if remaining Australian states like NSW had ended opt-out SRE in 2017 because the other 81% of people viewed it at best as only somewhat valuable. The relative strengths of the four possible value responses to the question mean we can't conclude that 69% of this survey's respondents "support SRE".

Looking at the ARDT and McCrindle findings, I'd say the level of active parental support for SRE today is well south of 50%. SRE almost certainly does not enjoy "massive support" as boasted by ICCOREIS.

In the media release, the Christian SRE spokesperson claims that an extreme minority wants to "stop parents from having a choice" – presumably by seeking to end SRE during class time. In the ensuing eight months the NSW Teachers Federation<sup>8</sup>, the Federation of P&C Associations NSW<sup>9</sup>, and the NSW Secondary Principals' Council<sup>10</sup> have all announced their opposition to SRE. They oppose the loss of class time that legislated SRE in the first place, and its alternatives secondly, forces on every student. These are the peak bodies for all parents, all teachers, and for high school principals who daily make public education happen in NSW: they are hardly an extreme minority. No reasonable person would or could stop any parent choosing to give their child "faith-based values education", but because that is a private choice it should be done *in their own time*. It is not a public need that by law must take up everyone's time in public schools.

Please now refer to the Christian SRE flyers titled "Information for Families". The flyer's primary and high school versions are identical except for the photography, so I've attached a copy of the primary version only<sup>11</sup>.

On the left-hand side of page 1 is a summary of SRE benefits. The summary states these benefits are "highlighted" in the ARDT report. The flyer is misleading in that it implies these are proven benefits of SRE which were among ARDT's actual findings, and it could leave some readers with the impression that the NSW Government itself concurs. In fact, ARDT states that these are *perceived* benefits. They are not highlighted in the report but appear once in the general discussion on page 115 in Section 4.4 *Perceived Benefits and Main Challenges of Providing SRE* and are "common views ... expressed in contributions to the Review ... [with] a great deal of consistency". These then are simply the views which SRE supporters gave ARDT. Strangely, these family flyers omit the two other perceived benefits listed in Section 4.4:

- Volunteer SRE teachers enjoy SRE
- Volunteer SRE teachers use SRE to maintain skills after retirement or before a return to paid work

The flyers also don't mention ARDT's qualification that: "...there is no objective data on the benefits [of SRE]".

Thank you for considering my letter. I hope it will prompt ICCOREIS to form and publicly present a balanced view of SRE in future.

Yours sincerely,



<sup>6</sup> [https://mccrindle.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Faith-and-Belief-in-Australia-Report\\_McCrindle\\_2017.pdf](https://mccrindle.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Faith-and-Belief-in-Australia-Report_McCrindle_2017.pdf), accessed 8-Feb-19

<sup>7</sup> The survey was not limited to public school parents, but the attitudes of the overall community would be closely indicative of parents generally.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/antiquated-nsw-teachers-to-campaign-to-end-mandatory-scripture-20190124-p50tb8.html>, accessed 8-Feb-19

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.pandc.org.au/nsw\\_government\\_and\\_opposition\\_must\\_stop\\_special\\_treatment\\_of\\_scripture\\_classes/](https://www.pandc.org.au/nsw_government_and_opposition_must_stop_special_treatment_of_scripture_classes/), accessed 8-Feb-19

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/high-school-principals-call-for-religious-education-to-be-scrapped-20181130-p50jeo.html>, accessed 8-Feb-19

<sup>11</sup> [https://thrivedigital01.worldsecuresystems.com/img/CSRE/SRE\\_DL\\_Booklet\\_Junior\\_V7.pdf](https://thrivedigital01.worldsecuresystems.com/img/CSRE/SRE_DL_Booklet_Junior_V7.pdf), accessed 11-Feb-19



June 13, 2018

## **Media Release**

### **SRE comes of age, enjoys massive support**

The peak body representing special religious education (SRE) in New South Wales schools says it has been overwhelmed by support from parents and school communities following a recent independent survey that shows parents want the choice of faith-based values education in schools.

Christian SRE spokesperson Murray Norman said providers have worked hard to bring a greater degree of professionalism and accountability to the program over many years and he is heartened by the research.

“Often the only voices we hear are the negative ones, because they shout the loudest, but they also do not represent the vast majority.

“Based on this research we know that Christian heritage is a primary source of values and that parents want the choice of faith-based values education. We also know that when given that choice, the overwhelming majority – 71 per cent – choose SRE.”

Mr Norman said NSW parents currently opt-in and that every student in SRE is there with their parents’ consent, although he acknowledges comments from NSW Labor recently that they are looking to change the opt-in forms.

“We are always open to improving the system and have had talks to that end with both the Government and Opposition.”

However he said the overriding fact is that SRE is widely supported and beneficial.

“There will always be an extreme minority with an agenda to stop parents from having a choice, and many of those people don’t even have school age children.

“But even education guidelines recognise the importance of spirituality in education, and SRE offers this.”

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**Media Contacts: Lyall Mercer – 0413 749 830 // Lily Trotman – 0434 791 084**

## Why choose Christian SRE?

Fulfilling the aims of the Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Melbourne 2008), Christian SRE helps students to 'become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens'. It aids them to 'have a sense of self-worth and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing'.

"Special Religious Education is a vibrant and vital part of a holistic approach to education which recognises the importance of the spiritual wellbeing of children. Through SRE students can develop a sense of meaning and purpose enabling them to grow in their ability to connect with culture, religion and community."

Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Glenn Davies

The NSW Government published the independent SRE review findings and recommendations in 2017. These highlighted how SRE positively contributes to students' understanding of their cultural heritage, is an avenue for their spiritual care, builds tolerance in schools, promotes multiculturalism, contributes to a well-rounded education, and connects schools with their local community.



The Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools (ICCOREIS) represents the following Christian churches:

Australian Christian Churches in NSW, Baptist Union of NSW, C3 Church, Christian Community Churches of Australia, Dioceses of the Anglican Church of Australia in the Province of NSW, Catholic Dioceses 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 Church in Australia and New Zealand – NSW and ACT Deaneries, Seventh-day Adventist Church, NSW Conferences, Uniting Church in Australia NSW/ACT Synod.

ICCOREIS is a member of All Faiths SRE NSW (AFSRE) which includes Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish and Sikh representatives.



Better Balanced Futures provides the foundation for life values in our children, to assist them to navigate in an ever-changing world. It aims to continually improve the implementation and delivery of SRE.

## Contact us



[www.christiansre.com.au](http://www.christiansre.com.au)



[info@christiansre.com.au](mailto:info@christiansre.com.au)



For regular updates about SRE,  
[facebook.com/christiansrenew](https://facebook.com/christiansrenew)

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QUESTION. EXPLORE. DISCOVER.

## Information for families

[www.christiansre.com.au](http://www.christiansre.com.au)





## What is Christian SRE?

Special Religious Education (SRE) is the time set aside in Public Schools where parents/carers can choose to have their children educated in the faith of their family and cultural background. The NSW Education Act (1990) allows for the local community to make this contribution to public education, via annually approved providers responsible for developing age appropriate lessons, training and authorisation of teachers.

Christian SRE begins with the understanding that we were created by a loving God, who calls us to fullness of life. Children are encouraged to see themselves as God sees them, full of gifts and potential to be a force for immense goodness in our world. As such, Christian SRE contributes to positive self-image, identity and resilience, forming young people in their understanding of the morals and values from the teaching of Jesus.

The Christian SRE programme takes various forms in different schools and regions. In major cities individual denominations often provide specific class options for schools (e.g. Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant). In some smaller regions, churches often unite their efforts to deliver a common curriculum, in combined Christian SRE classes.

## Who teaches SRE?

SRE teachers are people from local Christian churches, both paid and volunteer. All SRE teachers have mandatory working with children checks, as well as ongoing training in child protection and classroom management, lesson preparation and the appropriate use of authorised curriculum materials.

## What is taught?

Christian SRE teachers follow an authorised curriculum enabling students to question, explore and discover more about their Christian faith by examining the Word of God, church teaching and the faith experience of others. It helps students to grasp what it means to live well, to be in relationship with God and to embrace a life of service of others.

SRE teachers are encouraged to use a variety of teaching activities including writing, craft, small groups, class discussion, songs, drama, storytelling, games and new learning technologies. Every SRE provider must have on their website a link to the outline of the authorised curriculum they use.

## How do we choose SRE?

When completing the school enrolment form, a parent/carer nominates their choice in the Religion section e.g. Catholic, Greek Orthodox or Combined Christian. Schools should regularly inform parents of SRE options locally, but if a parent/carer is unsure or wants an update, they can simply contact the school. A parent/carer can alter their choice at any time by sending a note to the school principal. SRE providers fully support the right of parents/carers to choose non-SRE options, including supervised study, and Special Education in Ethics classes where available.

## Communication

On occasion SRE teachers may send information home about local church services, annual seasonal celebrations or access to sacramental or church programs, as part of ongoing communication with parents/carers of students in SRE. There are clear processes available at a school level and via SRE providers to enable parents/carers to have dialogue, to ask questions or to make a complaint if they have concerns about SRE.

## Need more info?

Most major Christian providers are part of the Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools (ICCOREIS) who has produced this resource on behalf of its members. Contact [info@christiansre.com.au](mailto:info@christiansre.com.au) for more information.

