

The Hon. Sarah Mitchell MLC
GPO Box 5341
SYDNEY NSW 2001



Dear Minister

Concerns regarding the implementation of the 2019 Special Religious Education Procedures

Fairness in Religions in School (FIRIS) is writing to bring to your attention the results of audits of school websites conducted by the parents at FIRIS in February and July/August 2019 in relation to the provision of Special Religious Education (SRE) in NSW Government schools.

In February 2019 FIRIS audited primary and secondary public school websites in the Metropolitan North and Regional North regions focusing on the requirement stated in the Special Religious Education Procedures (the Procedures) that if a Government school offers SRE its website is to contain links to the approved providers' authorised SRE curriculum scope and sequence(s).

In the Metropolitan North region -

- Of the 228 primary school websites visited, **only 4 (1.75%)** contained links to other information and of the 20 links identified, only 11 were clear links to curriculum scope and sequence information.
- Of the 62 secondary schools listed, **only 6 websites (9.7%)** had links to other information and of the 9 links identified only 6 were clear links to curriculum scope and sequence/s documents.

In the Regional North region -

- Of the 258 primary school websites visited, **only 4 (1.55%)** contained links to other information and of the 9 links identified, only 6 were clear links to curriculum scope and sequence information.
- Of the 54 secondary schools listed, **only 1 website (1.85%)** had a link to other information and this single link was identified as a direct link to a curriculum scope and sequence document.

In July/August FIRIS audited all of the secondary schools in the Metropolitan North region and has recorded the findings of the audit in the attached report (see Attachments 1 and 2).

The key finding of this audit was that of the 69 secondary schools providing SRE, **only 5 schools met all of the Department's requirements** identified in the Procedures and its supporting documents regarding the provision of information regarding SRE and Alternative Meaningful Activities (AMA) on their websites.

In consideration of the low rates of compliance and the general confusion regarding SRE identified in the February and July/August audits, FIRIS is also concerned that adherence to correct SRE / AMA enrolment processes is also low and that there is a very high likelihood that students are being placed in SRE without express consent from parents and caregivers.

Please note that evidence found during FIRIS' audits indicates that some schools are prepared to place students in SRE classes without express consent from parents / caregivers. In doing so they are acting contrary to information provided by the former Minister for Education in 2017 and contrary to the current enrolment process as described in the 2019 enrolment flowchart.

For example, in addition to an SRE Participation Letter linked to *Castle Hill High School (CHHS)* 'Religion and ethics' page, on 2 August 2019 CHHS had a letter regarding scripture seminars linked to a news item dated 20 February 2019 which stated –

If you do not want your child to take part in SRE for 2019, please complete the information below, and have your child return it to the box outside Ms Dane's (Deputy Principal) office by 1st March 2019. Those students not participating in SRE will be supervised by a classroom teacher during SRE seminar time.

If the information below is not provided to the school, we will assume that you are comfortable with your child attending SRE during 2019. (emphasis added)

In consideration of the above statement and CHHS' reported SRE participation rate of 84%,¹ FIRIS believes that it highly likely that CHHS is placing students in SRE without informed and express consent from their parents/caregivers.

Please note that the widespread failure of schools to provide parents and caregivers with the required information regarding the content of SRE and the high likelihood that students are being placed in SRE without informed and express consent formed part of FIRIS' recent complaint to the Office of the Children's Guardian and the NSW Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People regarding the risks to student health, safety and wellbeing associated with the provision of SRE in NSW Government schools.

In consideration of the above, FIRIS is requesting information regarding the measures the Department of Education will take to ensure that no student is currently, or will be in future, placed in an SRE classroom without the informed and express consent of their parent/s or caregiver/s.

FIRIS looks forward to your response.

With regards



Dr Darrin Morgan
on behalf of FIRIS

9 September 2019

CC:

Ms (Prue) Prudence Car, MP

Mr David Shoebridge, MLC

NSW Teachers Federation

NSW P&C Federation

¹ Jordan Baker, 'At some Sydney schools, fewer than one in 10 students choose scripture', Sydney Morning Herald, 8 July 2019, located at <https://www.smh.com.au/education/at-some-sydney-schools-fewer-than-one-in-10-students-choose-scripture-20190705-p524kk.html> and accessed on 06.09.2019.