

Memorandum to schools regarding SRE policy and implementation procedures

To all principals

The purpose of this memorandum is to clarify for principals the key requirements of the policy and procedures for enrolling students in special religious education (SRE) classes.

There has been no recent change to policy regarding SRE in government schools from an 'opt out' to an 'opt in' system.

Ensuring students are enrolled in SRE appropriate for their religious persuasion

Parents/caregivers in government schools have the right to have their children receive instruction in their preferred religious persuasion, where authorised teachers of that persuasion are available.

The Department's policy position is that schools initially use information provided on enrolment as the basis for organising SRE classes. The policy requires that a student be enrolled in a SRE class for their particular religious persuasion if they have identified as being of that religious persuasion on enrolment and a SRE class is available for that persuasion.

A template preference letter is attached to assist in the organisation of SRE. Please include this preference letter with your introductory communication to parents/caregivers of all students commencing Kindergarten or Year 7 in 2015. To the extent of any inconsistency, the information in this preference letter will take precedence over the information provided on enrolment in relation to SRE or any related alternative activities.

Where a parent/caregiver nominates to withdraw their child from SRE on the preference letter, the student will be placed in meaningful alternative activities.

The policy also requires that students continue in the same arrangement as the previous year, unless a parent/caregiver has requested a change in writing.

Timetabling of SRE classes

Not less than 30 minutes and not more than one hour of meaningful teaching time per week should be allocated for SRE. A flexible time schedule may be used, if the principal and the approved religious providers are in agreement, provided that the time allocated does not exceed an average of one hour per school week over the course of a school year. The lessons or period length for SRE should be consistent with the age and attention span of the students.

Ensuring students not attending SRE are provided with meaningful alternative activities

Parents/caregivers also have the right to choose not to have their children attend SRE. If a parent/caregiver does not wish their child to attend SRE, schools are to provide meaningful alternative activities with appropriate care and supervision. Students not attending SRE are to be located in a separate physical space from SRE classes. These activities neither compete with SRE nor are they lessons in the curriculum. Suitable activities include reading, private study and completing homework.

Special Education in Ethics (SEE) is an option available in some primary schools for students not attending SRE. There is currently only one approved provider of SEE in government schools and SEE programs are currently only available in some primary schools. The student enrolment form asks

parents/carers to indicate if they wish their child to attend SEE if it is an option available at the specific school and if they do not wish their child to attend SRE. This has led some to misinterpret that SEE is available at all schools.

Ensuring parents/caregivers are provided with adequate information about SRE and alternative activities

It is the responsibility of the principal to ensure parents/caregivers and the wider community are aware of SRE and the right to opt out of SRE.

This information is provided through enrolment information, the school website and the school newsletter. SRE providers can assist the school in this regard by providing information about their programs.

Any changes to SRE should also be communicated to the school community. Please note that SRE does not compete with alternative activities or SEE. Therefore, information regarding changes to alternative activities and/or SEE is to be communicated only to those parents/caregivers who have opted for their child not to attend SRE.

Parents/caregivers have the right to know how SRE will be organised each year, including the religious persuasions available and the religious organisations that will be providing SRE for particular classes or year groups. The authorised providers of SRE can provide parents/carers with more detailed information about their specific SRE program. Contact details of authorised SRE providers can be provided by the principal if required.

Fact sheets and the letter templates, together with further information about the Department's Special Religious Education and Special Education in Ethics policies and associated implementation procedures are available at <http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/religion/> for principals to use in:

- informing their school community about SRE;
- offering parents/caregivers the available SRE options, where a religious persuasion was not nominated on enrolment or the nominated religious persuasion is not available as a SRE program at the school; and/or
- offering parents/caregivers the option of the student attending SEE if it is available, but only if parents/caregivers have indicated that the student is not to attend SRE.

It is important to note that both **information** about SEE where it is available and an **offer** for parents/caregivers to nominate for their child to attend SEE should not be made until a parent/caregiver has formally withdrawn their child from SRE.

Regards

Gregory Prior
DEPUTY SECRETARY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNITIES

Adjunct Professor, School of Education
University of Western Sydney