

## 3 Role of the Church: Setting up SRE

### 3.1 Negotiating SRE

#### 3.1.1 Working with the School

As far as public schools are concerned, the official position on the need to negotiate is set out in Section 3 *Religious Education Implementation Procedures*. Some extracts follow:

- *It is the responsibility of each approved provider to provide sufficient special religious education teachers.*
- *It is the responsibility of an approved provider to recruit, train and authorise teachers of special religious education.*
- *The provider must ensure that the school is informed of the names and contact details of its local representatives and authorised teachers.*
- *The provider must ensure that all special religious education teachers are provided with a name badge to be worn at all times when on a school site.*
- *The representative of a special religious education provider should inform the principal when there are insufficient authorised teachers available.*

##### 3.1.1.1 General Arrangements

Liaising with a school

- a) Approaches to the school to confirm existing arrangements for SRE, to vary the times for SRE or to introduce SRE where there has been none in the past are best made early in Term 4 of the year preceding that in which changes are to be made. This may need to take place even earlier for secondary SRE where limited flexibility exists once the timetable has been constructed.
- b) The final arrangement is to be by agreement between the school Principal and all providers. The school cannot provide a particular time as a *fait accompli* if that time is unsuitable to the providers.
- c) Students not attending SRE are to be appropriately cared for by the school. They are not the responsibility of SRE providers.
- d) If a negotiated agreement cannot be reached, the matter should be referred to the Director of the Regional DEC office. Denominational consultants or the ICCOREIS Executive Officer should be involved in the negotiation process before referral to the Regional Director. A key contact for each denomination can be found on the ICCOREIS website.
- e) The churches are responsible for authorising the SRE curriculum to be taught.
- f) Chapter 7 of this handbook, dealing with models for SRE, sets out a variety of ways to organise a program.

##### 3.1.1.2 Timetabling Arrangements

The following points are to be considered when making timetabling arrangements with a public school to conduct SRE:

- a) SRE is not to be in competition with scheduled lessons.
- b) Timetabling is to be organised so that attendance at SRE is not inhibited.
- c) Placing SRE at the beginning and end of the day and allowing non-participating students to arrive late or to leave early is not consistent with the current policy.
- d) The *Education Act 1990* states that: "In every government school, time is to be allowed for the religious education of children of any religious persuasion, but the total number of hours so

allowed in a year is not to exceed, for each child, the number of school weeks in the year”. Notwithstanding this provision, which could take the form of one hour per week, the Implementation Procedures state:

“On average, not less than 30 minutes and not more than one hour of meaningful teaching time per week should be allocated for special religious education. The lessons or period length for SRE should be consistent with the age and attention span of the students.” page 4.

### **3.1.2 Working with Other Churches and/or Religious Persuasions**

Situations in schools and churches vary greatly across NSW. SRE programs for primary schools are often markedly different from those for secondary schools. Whatever the situation in a particular area, it is extremely important that churches cooperate among themselves and with other religious persuasions.

- a) Clergy or other official authorising agents have an obligation to consult with one another on the most suitable SRE arrangements for the number of students and the number of authorised teachers.
- b) Joint-denominational systems of SRE must have the agreement of all participants, and must take into account the needs of non-participating SRE providers. (See Chapter 7 of this handbook.)
- c) The establishment of local SRE Employment Boards should be done in consultation with all other religious persuasions in the area, even if only a limited number decide to participate in the board. Any teacher or teachers employed by a board must first be authorised by their approved provider and then by each participating church. Likewise, the agreed curriculum needs to be authorised by each participating church.
- d) The *Policy for Cooperative Special Religious Education (SRE) in Schools (NSW) and Code of Practice* developed by ICCOREIS should be consulted when churches engage in combined arrangements. (See Appendix C of this handbook.)

### **3.1.3 Working with Parents**

In the school situation, SRE teachers may have little or no contact with the parents of the children they are teaching. They nevertheless must appreciate the primary importance of parents under the law. Note the following:

- a) The school must inform parents of the organisation of SRE. Churches need to cooperate with the school by providing information early enough to enable parents to be informed. One obvious occasion is School/Kindergarten Orientation sessions.
- b) Parents are to be advised of their right of withdrawal from SRE classes. The *Education Act 1990* in Section 33 states: “No child at a government school is to be required to receive any general religious education or special religious education if the parent of the child objects to the child’s receiving that education”.
- c) SRE teachers from a particular church may sometimes wish to send home information about the SRE program or events taking place in that particular church. This is only permissible with the approval of the school Principal. Difficulties can arise in joint-denominational classes if a teacher from one church promotes activities in that church to children from other churches without the permission of those other churches. This permission from other churches should be obtained first before approaching the school principal for approval.

## 3.2 Ensuring Child Protection

### 3.2.1 Child Protection Legislation

The full range of activities for children and young people in a church is subject to the requirements of child protection legislation. Particular care needs to be taken with SRE because it involves going into public schools.

Each approved provider is required to ensure that each volunteer SRE teacher and each paid SRE teacher has a Working with Children Check (WWCC) Number. These must be verified and kept on file by the authorising church.

For information concerning WWCC contact the Office of the Children's Guardian (Phone: 02 9286 7219), or <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/Working-with-children/New-Working-with-Children-Check>

### 3.2.2 Department of Education and Communities Requirements

In addition to the requirements of child protection legislation, SRE teachers must meet the requirements of the Department of Education and Communities. *Religious Education Implementation Procedures* sets out the following responsibility for providers of SRE in government schools: "The authorisation of personnel to teach SRE is the sole responsibility of each individual religious persuasion. The persuasions are not to authorise any person as an SRE teacher who has a criminal conviction for

- a crime against a minor, or
- violence, or
- sexual assault, or
- provision of prohibited drugs".

The above requirements are usually incorporated into the authorisation (or engagement) form used by the Approved Providers. (See also Section 3.4.)

It is a requirement that all SRE teachers receive training in child protection issues. This is normally provided by the authorising body or organisation.

## **3.3 Selecting SRE Teachers**

### **3.3.1 Number of Teachers Required**

The selection, appointment and authorisation of SRE teachers are the responsibility of the individual Approved Provider. It is self-evident that, for SRE to be competently taught, a sufficient number of teachers is essential. It is a DEC requirement that all SRE teachers have completed initial training and be committed to on-going training in classroom management and child protection. SRE teachers should have the level of training, personal qualities and skills to teach in a manner appropriate to the needs of the age group of students they are authorised to teach. Furthermore, there should be enough relief SRE teachers who can fill in when a regular SRE teacher is absent.

If a church cannot guarantee staffing of SRE classes that are organised on a weekly basis, it should consider negotiating a different model for its SRE. One solution may be to change to a joint-denominational/combination model. (See Chapter 7 of this handbook for other models that may be used.)

### **3.3.2 Selection Criteria for SRE Teachers**

There are two aspects to consider in the selection of SRE teachers. Firstly, the church will need to consider the appropriateness of the person from a Christian perspective and secondly, any person selected must undertake the Working With Children Check and meet Department of Education and Communities requirements.

When considering a person from a Christian perspective, a church might use the following criteria:

- a) Volunteers should have a strong personal faith, knowledge of that faith and behaviour consistent with that faith.
- b) Volunteers should have a demonstrated affinity with children, an understanding of their needs and capacities, and a commitment to them as people.
- c) Volunteers, ideally, should have some prior experience of working with children
- d) Volunteers must undergo initial and on-going training as SRE teachers in both child protection and classroom management skills.

Clergy and other authorising agents may wish to add other criteria to meet the requirements of the local situation, for example, for teaching in special schools or at senior secondary levels.

## 3.4 Authorising SRE Teachers

### 3.4.1 What is Authorisation?

Authorisation refers to the permission given to a person by an Approved Provider to teach SRE.

The *Education Act 1990* states that: “The religious education to be given to children of any religious persuasion is to be given by a member of the clergy or other religious teacher of that persuasion authorised by the religious body to which the member of the clergy or other religious teacher belongs”.

No person may teach SRE in a NSW public school without formal authorisation by a religious persuasion approved by the Department of Education and Communities. The Department’s website lists the religious persuasions that are currently approved <http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/religion/index.htm>, see “Approved Providers”.

### 3.4.2 Why SRE Teachers need Authorisation

Every SRE teacher, and anyone who accompanies the SRE teacher into the school precincts, must be authorised. Even though a helper may not do any teaching, the person is still regarded as an SRE teacher. Although it can be a major undertaking to ensure that every SRE teacher is authorised, this approach has a number of benefits:

- a) It encourages churches to support, by prayer and resources, those they authorise to teach on their behalf. Churches have responsibility for the content of curriculum for SRE teaching. They approve the materials and syllabus used by their teachers. Authorisation encourages ministers to be sure that authorised persons have the ability and resources to teach SRE.
- b) With increasing numbers of religious groups approved to provide SRE, authorisation assists principals and/or coordinators to ensure that all SRE classes are taught by people authorised in accordance with legislative requirements.
- c) Authorisation helps to ensure that the school, the churches, the clergy and SRE teachers are aware of their respective responsibilities in relation to the teaching of SRE.
- d) Authorisation attempts to ensure that parental wishes are met with regard to the choice of SRE.
- e) Authorisation also protects the interests of the churches with regard to insurance matters. In the event of personal injury to an SRE teacher in the performance of duties on behalf of the church, the appointment of the person is clearly established. In the event of litigation proving liability of a church for action on the part of an SRE teacher resulting either in injury to persons or damage to property, or again deemed to be in breach of professional duties, then proper authorisation could be essential for insurance coverage.
- f) The duration of authorisation is normally stated on the card issued to SRE teachers. (See Section 3.4.4.) Authorisation is renewable subject to review by the representative of the religious persuasion. The church can revoke authorisation.

Schools can ask for verification of authorisation. The carrying of an authorisation card is the preferred way for the SRE teacher to provide evidence that this process has been completed according to the current requirements.

### 3.4.3 Authorisation Form

Most approved providers require SRE teachers to sign an authorisation form/engagement form. A component may be a statutory declaration.

A copy of the forms used by the Uniting Church and Association of Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT can be found in Appendix B of this handbook. The form may be adapted for use by other member churches of ICCOREIS.

### 3.4.4 Authorisation Card

The form of authorisation recommended by member churches of ICCOREIS is a standard card which carries the denomination's identification on the front.

The card must specify:

- a) the name of the teacher,
- b) the name of the Approved Provider
- c) the church's acknowledgement of authorisation, for example, an official seal or signature of the authorising person,
- d) the duration of the authorisation,
- e) the signature of the authorised person (cardholder).

A card must be issued to every person authorised by a church to be an SRE teacher, a helper for an SRE teacher or a relief SRE teacher. The signed authorisation card is carried when teaching SRE.

Each authorised teacher must wear a nametag when on school premises that contains their name and identifies them as an "SRE teacher".

### 3.4.5 Notifying the School about Authorised SRE Teachers

At the start of each school year, the minister or other official authorising agent should supply the school with a written list of the teachers authorised by that denomination to teach SRE. Where teachers are authorised for more than one school, each school Principal should be provided with a list of authorised teachers. Where additional or alternate SRE teachers or helpers are authorised during the year, an updated list should be provided for each school affected by the changes.

Some sample letters are included in Appendix B of this handbook.

### 3.4.6 Authorisation of SRE Teachers in Joint-Denominational Programs

Sections 32(2) and 32(3) of the *Education Act 1990* state: "(2) The religious education to be given to children of any religious persuasion is to be given by a member of the clergy or other religious teacher of that persuasion authorised by the religious body to which the member of the clergy or other religious teacher belongs. (3) The religious education to be given is in every case to be the religious education authorised by the religious body to which the member of the clergy or other religious teacher belongs".

The nature and operation of joint-denominational programs can vary considerably, particularly when comparing primary schools and secondary schools. Whatever the model, every participating church needs to authorise (also called cross-authorise) every SRE teacher who participates in the program, and inform the school. This should occur annually and as the need arises during the year. Each

participating church should keep written records of the joint authorisations. An example of a form that has been designed to do this can be found in Appendix B of this handbook.

Churches participating in joint-denominational programs should consider the following questions:

- a) Do all the SRE teachers authorised by participating churches have the desired level of understanding, training, skills and other personal qualities to meet the expectations of the parents enrolling their children for SRE conducted by those churches?
- b) Are all the SRE teachers capable of teaching a curriculum, agreed upon by the participating churches, in a suitable way to meet the range of needs of the students and to respect the doctrine and traditions of the churches in a sensitive manner?
- c) Because joint-denominational programs, particularly at secondary level, can be large and set the pattern for SRE in a school, have the needs of other churches and religious persuasions been met adequately? In this regard, has the timetabling of SRE taken into account the different needs?
- d) Have the churches in the joint-denominational program appointed a Joint-Denominational Program Coordinator who can work with the Church SRE Coordinator in each participating church?

## 3.5 Authorising the SRE Curriculum

### 3.5.1 Legal and Departmental Requirements

Section 32(3) of the *Education Act 1990* states: “The religious education to be given is in every case to be the religious education authorised by the religious body to which the member of the clergy or other religious teacher belongs”.

Page 8 of the RE Implementation Procedures states: It is the responsibility of an approved provider to:

- authorise the materials and pedagogy used by special religious education teachers
- provide an annual assurance to the NSW Department of Education and Communities that authorised teachers are only using materials and pedagogy authorised by the provider.
- make lesson content accessible on a website or at least provide a program outline and curriculum scope and sequence documents
- provide information about the content of lessons when requested by parents/caregivers/principals.

### 3.5.2 Denominational SRE Curricula

Most denominations have responded to the above requirements by developing or endorsing a curriculum appropriate to the needs of the students and the frequency of contact afforded by the SRE provisions. Details of specific curricula may be obtained from the appropriate denominational education office. (See Chapter 8 of this handbook for details.) Links to sample lessons and scope and sequence outlines on the websites of approved providers fulfil the expectations of the Implementation Procedures.

The local clergy or authorising agents generally have discretion in the adoption of a suitable curriculum for SRE. Care should be taken to ensure that, before authorising a particular curriculum, not only is it doctrinally acceptable but also educationally sound and suited to the developmental needs and age of the children.

### 3.5.3 Joint-Denominational SRE Curricula

The decision to join with others in a joint-denominational SRE program (also called combined arrangements) means that careful consideration should be given to agreeing on a suitable SRE curriculum. It is advisable to have a written agreement on the authorised curriculum between all participating denominations. Within any one school, joint-denominational programs may run parallel with programs operated by other religious persuasions.

Once an agreed curriculum is in place, it should not be changed more frequently than every three to four years. When a change is contemplated, consideration should be given to the sequencing of the new to the old curriculum so that children are not exposed to undue repetition.

Authorisation of curriculum should also be accompanied by authorisation of pedagogy (teaching practice). It is important to ensure that the teaching practice is suited to the authorised curriculum’s approach and content and to the range of preferred learning styles among the children in the class. Failure to take this into account will often lead to classroom management problems.

The following checklist can be used when choosing a curriculum and associated instructional materials for a joint-denominational program:

- a) Have the participants reviewed the ICCOREIS *Policy for Cooperative Special Religious Education (SRE) in Schools (NSW) and Code of Practice?* (See Appendix C of this handbook.)

- b) Have all the denominations involved been consulted?
- c) Have all participants explored and discussed material from several publishers?
- d) Have the participants agreed on when the choice of material will be reviewed?
- e) How long is the cycle of material?
- f) What will be the outcomes if one teacher wants to use other material?
- g) Can the teachers at one school use different material to that being used in other schools in a joint program?
- h) Has an agreement been drawn up between participating churches so that new clergy and teachers will be aware of previous decisions?
- i) Have the decision and reasons for the choice been communicated to the SRE team?
- j) Will all teachers abide by the agreement?
- k) Is the team keeping in touch with those responsible for training teachers for their denomination? (Often advertising for courses is sent with curriculum material published by a particular denomination).

**End of Chapter**