

**TEACHING NOT PREACHING**

**Making our public schools secular**

ERIC PEARSON STUDY GRANT 2021 REPORT  
JACK GALVIN WAIGHT





# Eric Pearson Study Grant

The Eric Pearson Study Grant is an annual \$23,000 award to a NSW Teachers Federation member to examine an area of industrial and professional relevance to Federation as a union and/or a group of members.

The award was established in memory of former Federation president Eric Pearson (1974–1975), who died on 8 June, 1977.

After active service in New Guinea and Borneo during World War 2, Eric Pearson returned to teaching and studied for a PhD from London University. He had a distinguished teaching and lecturing career and was Head of the NSW Department of Education at Sydney Teachers College. He also served as President of the Australian Teachers Federation.

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# Preface

The words ‘free’, ‘compulsory’ and ‘secular’ have had such a positive influence on our nation and public education systems; it is hard to imagine how they could ever be departed from. But, have we departed from the secular?



**N**ever before has there been so much religious funding, influence and interference in the NSW public education system, as evidenced by the School Chaplaincy Program, Religious Discrimination Bills and Special Religious Education (SRE) providers. In contrast, census data shows our community values are moving away from religious beliefs. Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows a decline in religion-based affiliation and that families are increasingly nominating “no religion” on the Census and departmental surveys. So how are we in this situation? Why does the religious lobby still hold so much political influence? And how can we safeguard our secular system in this context?





































This research paper seeks to answer these questions and explores how the attacks on our secular school system have unfolded. It analyses new and existing research, and documents what other Australian states and countries have done to successfully prevent and push back on this agenda. This research is important because, although there is now a unified position among the key NSW educational stakeholders opposing SRE and religious interference in our public schools, there is no consensus on how this would be achieved. There has also been little evaluation of the potential effect of the removal of SRE from our school system.

Research and comparative studies involving religion in public schools are rare, underfunded and often highly politicised. In this context, it is important to make clear that this report is not a critique of religion and does not seek to either promote or demote personal faith; Federation proudly celebrates diversity and, as a social justice union, has a long history of campaigning for positive rights.

At present, our students, teachers and parents must navigate what Professor Marion Maddox and Dr Cathy Byrne have described as our increasingly unsecular public education system. As a nation we have been silent on these questions and challenges for too long. Our public schools must be completely secular to provide for students from diverse cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds. In addition, the time required to provide SRE takes away teaching time, imposes an additional administrative burden and impacts on learning outcomes in an already crowded curriculum and school day.


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# Foreword

Deep knowledge  
and wisdom are  
essentially secular  
in nature.



**S**ecularism derives from the values of the Enlightenment; the belief in human reason as the principal means of understanding the world and resolving its conflicts.

One of the fundamental roles of education is the cultivation of critical thinking. By its very nature, critical thinking, which involves social and scientific inquiry, is an anathema to fundamentalism and its many manifestations including bigotry and intolerance.

Since religion belongs to the private, voluntary domain, with all religions being equal, public institutions must not favour one set of private religious choices over another. They must be secular. The guarantee of freedom of religion requires the right to freedom from religion in schooling.

Free, secular, universally accessible public education remains the key to a vibrant, socially cohesive and democratic multicultural society.

The investigations arising from the Eric Pearson Study Grant have contributed significantly to the work and ongoing development of the NSW Teachers Federation.

*Teaching not preaching: Making our public schools secular* is no exception. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis and outlines campaign strategies on this important topic.

Jack Galvin Waight, who was awarded the 2021 Eric Pearson Study Grant, is a Federation Country Organiser in the Hunter/Newcastle area. He is also Federation's Representative on the Department's Consultative Committee for Special Religious Education (SRE) and Special Education in Ethics (SEE).

I congratulate Jack for his contribution and commend his report to you.

*Angelo Gavrielatos*  
FEDERATION PRESIDENT

# Introduction

Imagine a country where public schools teach religion, not as an academic subject, but as sectarian truth.

Imagine a country where books are published on how to infiltrate schools and create followers.

Imagine a country where the government cuts funding to public schools by \$559 million, and in the same period delivers \$184 million for school chaplaincy.

This country is not imaginary; this is Australia.

Now, imagine a state that facilitates clerical influence in schools; where once a week all academic instruction is stopped and children as young as four are segregated based on religious beliefs for scripture. A state where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) students are told in the playground to “pray their gay away”. Girls in class are instructed to be subservient and students with disabilities are informed that their parents must have sinned. Welcome to the free, compulsory and non-secular NSW public education system of 2022.

Such analysis may be confronting. It certainly does not fit with our Aussie image or survey results reporting that Australians have a relaxed view of religion and generally perceive faith as a private matter. It also does not fit with our high-quality, approved curriculum that is inclusive and secular, albeit overcrowded. In this sense, for many teachers the weekly battle to keep their schools a secular haven from Special Religious Education (SRE) is compounded by the loss of valuable teaching and learning time. Meanwhile, the Education Department’s own policy documents and the State Government’s curriculum review continue to highlight the need to prioritise teaching and learning.

The extent of this disruption to learning, desecularisation and growing religious interference came as a surprise to me, so much so, that I was forced to change the title of this project; “Keeping our public schools secular”, simply didn’t fit with the evidence. Regrettably, my research shows some of the main breaches in our secular society are in education and that the NSW public education system is one of the least secular in Australia. International comparisons also reveal a trend away from segregated religious instruction to a world view/general religious education approach.

Federation has historically taken a cautious approach to this contentious issue, mindful that our membership is diverse and the union is respectful of all faiths. In 2018, Federation was invited to NSW Parliament for a round table discussion about SRE by Jihad Dib, then shadow education minister. Federation, one of the most progressive unions in the country, had no formal policy position. As Federation’s representative, I said Federation believes in a free, secular public education system. I then highlighted numerous

concerns consistently raised by our members about SRE, including inappropriate content and material, evangelising, disruption to students’ learning and loss of valuable curriculum time.

Religion is often a controversial topic and I understand the reasons for our union not prioritising sectarian issues. Still, things needed to change in NSW and the question needs to be asked, “Have we ever had a secular public education system?”

Since that time, Federation has developed a very strong policy position and is leading the campaign to remove SRE. Our policy is based on the principle that every child should have access to a free and secular school education. Federation believes the Education Act should be changed to better reflect these community beliefs and ensure no child is discriminated against for their religious or non-religious beliefs. Our position is based on the proviso that any education (religious or not) should be delivered in line with an approved curriculum, by a qualified teacher and should recognise that teachers are professionals who must determine the implementation of the curriculum. SRE takes up valuable teaching and learning time and is no longer appropriate for 21st century learning.

So far, we have played a leading role in changing the Department’s enrolment process so that rather than requiring students to attend SRE unless they opt out, written parental consent is required to opt in for SRE. We have developed an in-principle, unified policy position on SRE with all key educational stakeholders and proudly campaigned for the historic marriage equality legislation. These achievements are significant. However, in the same period we have witnessed:

- the rise in the influence and strength of the religious lobby
- increasing numbers of small but loud right-wing political groups and individuals such as One Nation and Mark Latham
- the introduction of divisive religious discrimination bills
- record funding for school chaplains and religious schools
- growing influence by religious groups in our public school system.

This is without doubt a crucial time in our secular history. There is a significant ideological battle

being waged. The battle is for the hearts and minds of our kids, yet most of the population no longer seem to understand what secular means for our society. This is particularly concerning.

This report investigates the history of our unique secular system (Chapter 1) and analyses how religious organisations are exploiting legislative gaps through SRE and religious programs disguised as welfare support (Chapters 2 and 6). Chapter 3 reveals how government-subsidised chaplains are encouraging the use of this material, while our unfair government funding system continues to prioritise private, mainly religious schools at the expense of our public system, educational outcomes and society in general (Chapter 7). Both sides of politics continue to ignore these issues, which means that secular education and our children suffer. It is telling that Scott Morrison, the 30th Australian prime minister, said in his first parliamentary speech: “Australia is not a secular country” (Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 2008, p. 350). This report outlines how this has happened and details what we can do to reclaim the secular (Chapter 8).

In analysing similar campaigns, suggesting strategies and setting out clear recommendations to safeguard our secular system, this paper shows that making our public schools secular is key union business.

# Methodology

This is an action research project. Therefore, as part of the research process, I have continued to build alliances, developed strategies for change and campaigned in this field.



This research is organised into four interconnected layers:

1. searching for, and collecting, relevant literature
2. conducting a thematic analysis
3. semi-structured interviewing of key stakeholders using questions based on themes
4. synthesising analysis and qualitative data into recommendations for action.

Qualitative data has been collected, encompassing:


- special legal advice pertaining to legislation
- extensive industrial and historical literature reviews
- structured interviews with academics, activists, labour theorists, and union leaders.

Interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom in four different states and territories between February 2021 and January 2022 (see Appendix for detailed information). Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are from the interviewees.

After synthesising this data, research and existing Federation and Australian Education Union policy, this paper examines how best Federation can campaign with members, principal groups, parents and the community for truly secular public schools.

Because Christianity is the dominant cultural hegemonic norm in Australian society and more than 90 per cent of Special Religious Education (SRE) providers and chaplains are Christian, this report focuses on Christian religious providers. However, the analysis, legislation and policies apply to all religious providers in schools. In this context it is important to reiterate that although this report analyses the history of religious instruction in schools, it is not a critique of religion.

The rationale of this paper is to provide Federation with in-depth research and a clear strategic plan. It is an analysis of existing and new research and provides recommendations to ensure that our NSW public education system is secular, inclusive and appropriately reflects multicultural and pluralistic 21st century NSW society.





# OUR UNIQUE SECULAR HISTORY

There is almost universal agreement that the term 'secular' is controversial and suffers from not having a shared understanding of its meaning. For the purpose of this report, I have defined 'secular' as the separation of religion from state affairs. Most importantly, secularism is not anti-religious; it protects all faiths and represents our best chance to create a society where we can all live together fairly and peacefully.

Just two decades ago, sociologists and historians were writing about the end of religion; the view being that religion was playing less of a role in public life. Science and reason were thriving and it was believed that religion would slowly die out, at least in the public sphere of influence.

This global analysis fitted with Australia's relaxed attitude to religion and Census figures that showed religious affiliation declining at a rapid rate. Even media publications were running articles titled "God's obituary".

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the subsequent war on terror and the beginning of the rise of the religious right in Australian politics under John Howard's prime ministership all marked the start of a massive shift.

## A PROFOUND SECULAR U-TURN

It is most likely religion will remain a central political issue for the foreseeable future. Experts are predicting that the early 21st century and beyond will be remembered, along with the rise of Asia, as the return of fundamental, conservative-style religion to public life.

Australia is in a unique position on both these fronts. We are geographically close to Asia and we are a vibrant

multicultural society with more than 260 religions. This represents a great opportunity for our nation to thrive on diversity and tolerance. However, ideological differences between a growing, conservative, monocultural belief that Christianity is the basis for shared Australian values and a secular inclusive multiculturalism are and will continue to cause tension.

How Australia responds to these tensions, particularly in the education sphere, will be crucial to our ongoing social cohesion.

Although most religious Australians continue to adopt a respectful, secular approach to our public institutions, many academics highlight a growing link between religion, nationalism and extremism. Australian churches with more fundamentalist views are growing rapidly in number and are increasingly influencing our political and civic systems.

This shift was started by former prime minister Howard as a strategy to gain votes. He used campaign ideas borrowed from the American religious right, supported by our own conservative religious activists and think tanks, to attract a wider non-religious Australian public (Maddox, 2005).

This changing nature of religiosity is represented not just in numbers but in influence. For example, the market-based church model that former prime minister Scott Morrison is a member of is being copied by traditional religions whose affiliations are falling.

This growing movement combines modern music, entertainment, commercialisation and the belief that faith will deliver prosperity. The focus on wealth-creation is the perfect fit for neoliberalism and aims to influence all elements of civil society, most notably education.

As outlined by London-based, Australian investigative journalist Elle Hardy in *Beyond belief: How Pentecostal Christianity is taking over the world* (2021), this faith-based social, cultural and political movement has a lot in common with the global shift towards right-wing governments and anti-liberal world order, mass migration, feminism and mainstream science.

Its growth also has Australian origins, with megachurches such as Hillsong (which boasts more than 150,000 weekly worshippers across 30 different countries), perhaps overtaking coal as our largest and most controversial export.

These developments and the worldwide secular U-turn requires new understanding and a new approach. Secularists are losing ground to organised, right-wing, conservative lobby groups, most notably the Australian Christian Lobby whose influence in the public sphere, particularly on education policy, is growing.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SECULAR

An agreed definition and understanding are important because secularism has the potential to be a unifying political and social force and a movement for social justice. However, it is a term that has been so relentlessly maligned that its meaning has become difficult to discern.

Religious academic Dr Cathy Byrne sums it up best:

*“Our biggest challenge is that as a public, as a society, we do not have a shared meaning about this word ‘secular’. So perhaps part of our work today is to bring that word back into the conversation, get people using it, thinking about it, because that’s where the conversation begins. If we agree that we want secular education, then we can ask questions about why we have religious education in our schools and why we have private providers providing it.”*

Byrne defines secular education as:

*“State-driven, inclusive, striving to be neutral and equitable. A secular approach to the teaching of religion and ethics relies on the political notion of church-state separation. It is not anti-religious or religious. In this model, no particular religion or non-religious perspective is privileged or provided. In fact, privilege is examined so as to deconstruct it.”* (Byrne, 2014, p. 19)

## LEGISLATION UNDERPINNING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Religion is, of course, not new. In Australia we are home to the oldest living spiritual culture on the planet and we continue to have a religiously and culturally diverse population. The first traditional schools in Australia were all Christian, but in the 1800s the growth of the population and sectarian conflict forced change.

To enable peace and prosperity, a consensus developed that education should be ‘free, secular and compulsory’, the state’s role in the provision of education should be paramount and the role of the churches should end along with the state aid they were receiving. Although sectarian debate was fierce, NSW followed Victoria’s lead in 1880 when our colonial premier Henry Parkes signed our Public Instruction Act.

The legislation was revolutionary for its time. Not only did the Act completely end state aid to religious schools for nearly a century but also led to the development of a system-wide focus on secular lessons that made public schools the best education option in the country.

Professor Marion Maddox said:

*“The legislation embodies our forebears’ best efforts to provide universally accessible education where children learn to think of themselves as bound together in common citizenship.”* (Maddox, 2014, p. 202)

*“The system’s founders did not reach those conclusions because they hated religion, or wanted a Godless society, or believed that education should be value-free. On the contrary, they thought that the segregated religious schools that preceded universal public education were damaging the colonies’ social cohesion by dividing their children on lines, and damaging their democratic and economic prospects by restricting education to those who could pay.”* (Maddox, 2014, p. 31)

Unfortunately, there was a major compromise in the NSW legislation that would have far-reaching consequences for the next 150 years. To achieve consensus for the Act, Parkes agreed to include a separate provision for Christian clerics to run religious instruction classes for an hour a week.

This has meant that NSW has had the weakest interpretation of secular schooling in Australia. As Mad-

dox pointed out: “God has never officially left the NSW public school system.”

## AUSTRALIA'S CONSTITUTION

Australia's Constitution does not contain the statutory equivalent of separation between church and state like the US, France or even Fiji. America is famous for its figurative wall between church and state, enshrined in its constitution and laws, which bans government funding for religious schools. The French are extremely proud of their *Laïcité*; everything is secular, and it is not possible to carry out religious instruction during school hours or on school premises.

Australia's secularity is less strident and regulative, but its importance was recognised by our forebears in section 116 of the Australian Constitution:

*“The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.”*

In 1901, this separation resonated with the consciousness of the nation but when challenged by case law the courts have taken a very narrow legal interpretation to section 116. For example, the 1981 Defence of Government Schools case argued that funding to religious schools was unconstitutional, similar to America's legal interpretation. The judges ruled that, although small, the differences in the wording of the constitutions were significant enough to reject the case. A national church or religion (such as that in England) would be unconstitutional, but providing financial assistance to non-government religious schools was not. It was not a unanimous decision with Justice Murphy dissenting vehemently. Regrettably, his view was the minority, meaning that the language of our Constitution has not been able to give us a general protection for secularism and that the Defence of Government Schools' 20-year slogan of 'rich schools with pools' remains relevant today.

I interviewed Michael Kirby AO, former High Court judge and great champion of public education, and asked him about this case. While acknowledging his own religious beliefs, he asserts the importance of our 'secular wall' and the need for the principle of secularism to be strengthened because of the ineq-

uitable funding to private schools. He believes that there may come a time to re-examine the narrow legal interpretations of section 116 and the Defence of Government Schools case (highlighting his own dissenting decision in the High Court case over taxpayer funding of World Youth Day as a possible precedent, Chapter 3) but said, regrettably, that time was not now.

Human rights organisations are critical of aspects of our Constitution because there are inadequate protections for minority religions and people without faith as well the significant financial costs that make it difficult for most Australians to access our courts. This raises the questions of whether our legal system is fair and how different our education system and society might have been with a different legal interpretation. In most cases, it appears that only the rich can challenge existing laws and when these laws are challenged on educational grounds most of the judges hearing the cases have come from elite private schools.

There is no bill of rights in Australian law and Australia does not recognise international treaty obligations unless these laws are included in our domestic legislation. This means that although Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights 1948 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which recognise freedom of religion and beliefs, our human rights commitments are more symbolic than binding. Human rights, refugee advocate and National Secular Lobby ambassador Julian Burnside QC said that a bill of rights with the appropriate wording and protections would assist to strengthen our secular wall and prevent the indefinite detention in Australia of human beings who have not committed an offence. However, until politicians can be convinced that there are votes to be won in secular policy and humanely treating asylum seekers, he believes this to be unlikely.

Legislation, such as a bill of rights, is not always the only solution or necessarily the best advocacy route. Constitutional law expert Dr Luke Beck used America as an example when I interviewed him. Compared with Australia, the US has an accessible legal system with legal precedents and a strong separation of church and state. However, its political parties have become so influenced by religious organisations, and its education system so marketised and devolved, that when it comes to religious influence,

# 'Most people in Australia are not in favour of religion dominating public life'

laws don't mean much. For example, with decisions made at local school-board levels, creationism is taught alongside evolution in many public schools.

Beck believes that an Australian republic with an appropriate referendum question has the potential to solidify our secular principle: re-open the constitutional question of religious school funding and the tax-exempt status of religious institutions.

Again, this seems unlikely at present, meaning the battle for our secular public education system and society is going to be run and won at the grassroots campaigning level. Strategy-wise, we need to create the pressure to change the laws rather than risking the immense cost of mounting legal challenges.

## SO, ARE WE A SECULAR OR CHRISTIAN NATION?

Some Australians, including former prime minister Scott Morrison, argue we are not a secular country.

National Secular Lobby President Peter Monk said during the 2020 *Teachers not Preachers* webinar:

*"It's important to understand that Australia is not a Christian country, neither constitutionally nor in our societal makeup. Even at the time of Federation in 1901, when Australia was 96 per cent Christian, the importance of the separation of church and state was recognised in the Victorian Education Act of 1872, which was the first legislative secular public education system. Not only did it state that education should be free, secular, and compulsory, but it also ended public financial support of religious schools and it banned religious instruction from being taught during school hours."*

*"Section 116 of the Constitution states the importance of allowing people to hold whatever beliefs they want, but it also specifies that religious beliefs should not be active in the governance of a country. Today, of course, we live in a pluralistic society with people of many religions and traditions and a significant proportion of the population with no religion. Secularism seeks to recognise this and offer a level playing field for everyone, neither persecuting nor privileging any belief system."* (Monk in Shoebridge, 2020)

Rationalist Society Australia President Meredith Doig's comment in my interview, also resonated.

*"Legally, arguably, yes we are secular, because we've got section 116 of the Constitution (although that's been very narrowly interpreted). Socially, yes, we are secular. Most people in Australia are not in favour of religion dominating public life. However, politically, we are not; there is simply too much religious influence in Australian politics."*

This analysis is significant. Education policy in Australia has become so highly politicised that our classrooms have regrettably become one of the primary sites for conflict about the relationship between religion and state. This concern is backed up by Maddox:

*"We assume we have a strong separation of church and state in this country, but Australia's minimalist system is at the mercy of political influence. And when you think about it, if you wanted to change the nation, education is the perfect place to start."*



# SPECIAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AKA SCRIPTURE

C3 Church Newcastle, a large Special Religious Education (SRE) provider, summed up the situation best on its website: “An SRE teacher is not just a teacher, but a government-endorsed evangelist. Schools are an open door to the gospel” (C3 Syd., n.d.b).

SRE can occur in NSW public schools for up to one hour per week. A member of the clergy or a religious volunteer takes each class. No academic instruction is allowed to occur during this time and students are segregated on religious grounds. SRE is not provided by qualified teachers, the content is not authorised by the Department, and the NSW Education Minister has little to no control over what occurs in this time.

This hangover from the 19th century is what many activists and academics describe as the blackspot, the blindside, the covert curriculum. It is a massive waste of valuable learning time and has become a major recruitment tool for churches with declining numbers and fundamentalists. As the Anglican Church of Newcastle explains on its SRE website: “In NSW, some 250,000 children attend Christian SRE lessons, so it is the largest ministry to children” (Anglican Diocese Newcastle, n.d.). Far greater than all church programs put together and as C3 Church outlined: “85 per cent of children in our local public schools don’t attend church regularly. Their scripture class is their church” (C3 Syd., n.d.a).

## ALARMING REPORTS

The following media articles give a snapshot of what may or may not be occurring in SRE lessons every week across NSW.

- Mormons have been kicked out of teaching weekly scripture classes to primary school students because they are not authorised providers. “Mormons Caught Teaching Religion to Primary School Students” (Morphet, 2019), reported *The Sunday Telegraph*.
- “One [Ulladulla High School] parent told the ABC her daughter came home distressed after being told God is going to burn the world, while another parent says her child walked out of class when the religious instructor claimed he could ‘cure’ homosexuals” (*South Coast Public School Kids Unable to Opt Out of Scripture Classes*, ABC, 2011).
- A religious education teacher has been stood down for telling a year 6 class the Victorian bushfires were God’s punishment for decriminalising abortion. “Grafton RE Teacher Stood Down” (Allen, 2009), reported *The Daily Telegraph*.
- “Scripture material endorsed by the Anglican Diocese of Sydney and taught to NSW public school children as young as five includes dissecting an animal, encouraging children to have secrets with adults, linking a man’s blindness to his parents’ sins and reminding scripture teachers not to see children with disabilities as ‘unintelligent’” (McCarthy, 2021) reported the *Illawarra Mercury*.

Dr Darrin Morgan, from concerned parent and citizen community group Fairness in Religion in Schools, said: “SRE is a prime example of how outdated 19th century legislation is being exploited by 21st century evangelists.”

Fairness in Religion in Schools has been campaigning to remove SRE for many years, with MLC David Shoebridge describing the organisation as the sole regulator of SRE, and along with Federation and the Greens, are the only groups holding the Department and NSW Government to account.

Fairness in Religion in Schools co-director and operations manager Craig Macpherson explained that the wording change in the 1990 Education Act from scripture to Special Religious Education is apt. “Firstly, it highlights the covert subtle messaging that is being employed to market SRE, as somehow relevant to modern society. Secondly, it is ‘special’. So special that no other Department of Education rules apply to it, including the Controversial Issues in Schools Policy.”

The Department even allowed this special status to override health and safety requirements to manage risks in the depths of the pandemic. SRE providers continued to assert their right of entry to schools under NSW legislation while parents and others were excluded. Newcastle East Public School parents took their frustration to the media after the provider demanded SRE continue (Gregory, 2020).

Byrne also referred to SRE’s special status:

*“It is special because no other subject area is handed over to vested interest groups. The Department even turns a blind eye to any breaches of policy around multiculturalism, homophobia and sexism during this compulsory hour. It’s special because it’s a self-regulating system. Any complaint just gets managed by the providers themselves.”*

Author and social commentator Jane Caro doesn’t think SRE is special: “It is indoctrination, not education. Secular public schools should only ever be places of education, not indoctrination.”

## MAIN ISSUES

Federation members have been complaining about SRE for years. The main concerns raised are the inappropriate content of SRE lessons, the quality of the instructors, and the antiquated Departmental policy that prevents students who are not participating in scripture from engaging in academic instruction or formal school activities during this time. As highlighted by *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2019, even if only one student is participating, SRE can still stop

a whole class, often a whole year group. The article also reveals that in many high schools, as few as 5 per cent of students are enrolled in SRE (Baker, 2019). Even the providers recognise numbers are dropping, with a May 2020 online article written by Youthworks CEO Craig Roberts stating: “There are 806,000 students in New South Wales government schools and less than 10 per cent of them attend Christian SRE.”

This means that SRE is causing most students to miss valuable learning time, accumulating to the equivalent of as much as an entire term for a primary student graduate. This wasted time affects student outcomes and contradicts the Department’s own Schools Success Model that “requires a focus on teaching and learning”. Not to mention the 2020 NSW curriculum review that recommended, as a priority, the Government reduce the impact of extra-curricular issues and topics.

SRE is also a logistical nightmare for schools. The administrative burden and impact on the school day is huge. For teachers, it’s a massive imposition. While there is no policy requirement for the teacher to be in the classroom, many teachers are so concerned with what’s occurring they do stay for the students’ protection and/or to maintain discipline.

Dr Morgan said during the *Teachers Not Preachers* webinar: “For our students, the ones that are attending, we have concerns over what they’re being exposed to. We just don’t know what’s going on in the classroom. It’s a black hole in the school week where all other policies and procedures are suspended” (Morgan in Shoebridge, 2020).

‘It is special because no other subject area is handed over to vested interest groups’

Parents are shocked when they find out what is occurring in SRE, often becoming the greatest campaigners for change. At meetings with the Department, NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations (P&C) President Natalie Walker has repeatedly raised concerns around choice, educational priorities, students not being able to continue the curriculum and the loss of valuable school time, money and resources. These resources could instead be prioritised to benefit the students and their learning, especially in recent times when so many students have missed out on significant face-to-face learning time due to COVID and natural disasters.

For principals, there's a massive administrative burden in organising SRE, which takes away crucial time for leading and managing the school. Both the Primary Principals' Association and the Secondary Principals' Council have a policy calling on Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics to run outside lesson time or not at all, with the SPC having a long-standing position that SRE has no place in a secular school setting and that religious education is a parental, not a school, responsibility.

- In term 2, 2021, the Primary Principals' Association surveyed its members. A whopping 86 per cent of principals wanted changes to the implementation of Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics. In response, the Primary Principals' Association distributed a second survey in late term 2 to identify what changes should occur; only 4.35 per cent said no changes were required
- 43.48 per cent wanted to allow students not attending to engage with the curriculum
- 71.74 per cent wanted to move SRE to outside school hours
- 82.61 per cent wanted to leave the teaching of religion to parents

The Secondary Principals' Council issued the same survey to its members. The results were:

- 93.24 per cent of schools had SRE participation rates below 50 per cent
- 40.5 per cent of schools had SRE participation rates below 10 per cent

- only 9 per cent of principals had no issues with implementation of SRE
- 59 per cent believed the time allocated to SRE added to an overcrowded curriculum
- 61.5 per cent believed SRE timetabling affected other programs
- 54.5 per cent had workload concerns around the administration of SRE
- 30 per cent had concerns around the quality of the religious instruction.

Survey data was provided by NSW Department of Education Consultative Committee for SRE and Special Education in Ethics representatives; NSW Primary Principals' Association vice president Michael Trist and NSW Secondary Principals' Council executive member Michael Rathborne. Overwhelmingly, principals highlighted concerns around the disruption caused to so many by so few, as well as issues with the aggressive attitude and approach of many providers.

## SHOULD SCHOOLS TEACH GENERAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND WHAT ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION IN ETHICS?

Federation supports General Religious Education, which is an important part of the current curriculum. General Religious Education is "education about the world's major religions, what people believe and how those beliefs affect their lives". It is taught by qualified teachers employed by the Department of Education in a safe, respectful and inclusive classroom setting. Federation's policy position for Special Education in Ethics is the same as SRE. It states that any education (religious or not) should be done in line with an approved curriculum and by a qualified teacher. Special Education in Ethics is also a logistical nightmare for schools.

Ethics is not the answer. The program started out with good intentions but has become a distraction, helped to legitimise SRE, and is now part of the problem.

This analysis is backed up by the data obtained in my interviews, indicating that the presence of the Primary Ethics program has made the campaign to remove SRE much harder. The fact that there is a push to extend the program into high schools creates more difficulties. Byrne explained that "during the 'ethics wars',

the polarised debate did not focus on how ethics may be taught in [General Religious Education], the appropriate place for both religion and ethics. Instead, it became misunderstood as being either for getting religion out of school or keeping religion in it.”

This is a very important lesson to learn. The challenge and one of the purposes of this report is for Federation to create a different discourse. We must challenge the attempt by Conservative politicians over many years to denigrate public education and our curriculum by suggesting our students aren't taught values. Our teachers and schools seek to provide a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. We do not exclude children on the basis of wealth, religion or any kind of difference from the dominant cultural norm. We want our students to be “confident and creative learners, and active informed citizens”, as set out in the Melbourne Declaration 2008.

Students have the right to a curriculum that includes understanding of religion, ethics, values and the ability for students, supported by qualified teachers, to develop the critical thinking skills needed to make their own decisions. They also have the right not to be segregated from their peers or to be preached to in a particular sectarian doctrine. Our students have the right to be educated, not indoctrinated. This distinction is significant. It is backed up in all my interviews and was part of the reason for the title change of this report to *Teaching not Preaching: Making our public schools secular*. Strategically, framing this complicated and controversial debate is the key, as outlined in my recommendations.

## WHAT ARE THE ACADEMICS SAYING?

The following key themes emerged in my literature review and subsequent interviews and discussions with the academics in this field (many, if not most, of whom are religious):

- consensus that SRE is a flawed, dangerous, outdated model that no longer has any place in our school system. In fact, it is considered the exact opposite of what is required for 21st century learning
- concern and growing evidence that SRE is promoting extremism and sectarian conflict in our multicultural society

- there are benefits to teaching students about world views via General Religious Education or secular religious education instead of SRE.

In my view, Associate Professor Anna Halafoff, a sociologist of religion, sums up the consensus best:

*“I used to say that you could have both SRE and world views education in parallel. But not now, we've really shifted our position. It's time to move with the times and replace SRE, which is an antiquated provision.” (Halafoff in Shoebridge, 2020)*

Halafoff has been working on this topic since 2006, and first became aware of the dangers of SRE while conducting a study called *Global risks on community relations pertaining to diverse religions across Australia*. Through this study she discovered that SRE and Christian privilege were perpetuating exclusive narratives and narrow nationalism that were potentially feeding into social exclusion and extremism.

According to Byrne, some parents even moved their children to a religious school because their public school's SRE program was too extreme. This included children being told that foreign nations have disgusting customs and that worshipping false or foreign gods is unmitigated evil. Byrne is one of the few academics, if any, who has been allowed by the Department to conduct a quantitative and qualitative study of the attitudes of parents, public school teachers, and SRE volunteers in NSW. She interviewed a group of primary school students and although the sample size was relatively small the results show that after a year of SRE most students were more likely to have negative attitudes towards people who don't believe in God or believe in different gods. The change in responses was alarming and pointed to a tendency for segregated religious instruction to negatively influence attitudes towards diversity.

Dr David Zyngier, from the Faculty of Education at Monash University, views school-based religious instruction as flawed, divisive and damaging. He said it must be changed before too much damage is done to students and to the public education system (Zyngier, 2013). Maddox echoed the above concerns: “The question has to be asked of what educational benefit is served by continuing SRE?”

'Once parents know  
what is happening,  
they are aghast, but  
they simply don't  
know what's going on  
in the SRE classroom'



## THE DEPARTMENT OF DATA AND MALADMINISTRATION

Any teacher will tell you that the NSW Department of Education is obsessed with data, but when it comes to SRE the Department refuses to collect and release any participation or compliance data, despite this being a recommendation of the:

- 1980 Rawlinson Religion in Education in NSW Government Schools Report
- 2011 NSW Legislative Council inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill
- 2015 ARTD (consultancy) review of SRE and Special Ethics Education.

It is hard not to conclude that the lack of accountability is due to the political pressure to maintain the special status of SRE.

In 2019, Fairness in Religion in Schools conducted an extensive audit of providers and schools, revealing extremely low rates of compliance with departmental policy. Most notably, fewer than 10 per cent met the basic requirement to provide a link to their SRE curriculum scope and sequence document. Similar results were found in a 2021 audit of 80 central Sydney schools. Morgan said this was “alarming, the SRE providers can’t even follow the Department’s simple annual assurance guidelines for approval to enter schools”. In my opinion, the Department’s refusal to regulate or even continue to monitor the providers in any appropriate manner is equally alarming.

Byrne said:

*“Stridently maintaining these practices, policies and protocols may have been appropriate in a different century but are no longer appropriate today. When I began researching religion in public education, I was expecting education bureaucrats to defend secular principles in NSW, but instead they did the opposite.”*

No matter your view on the appropriateness of SRE, it is hard to argue against the need for the Department to regulate the sector. This is obvious in my research and forms a key part of my recommendations. For the Department to continue to turn a blind eye to matters that it has considerable policy control and authority over, despite the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and recommendations in the aforementioned independent reviews for greater accountability, is bordering on maladministration.

## WHAT DO PARENTS THINK?

With only limited and confusing information provided by the Department, most parents are oblivious to what is occurring in SRE. Often parents think that SRE is part of the curriculum and their children are doing general religious education. Others do not wish to ostracise their child.

Maddox said:

*“I think the way to draw parents and the community in is to say, you might be in favour in principle, but have you looked at what is being taught in these programs? Do we really think that religion is such a trivial topic that we can hand it over to enthusiastic amateurs to teach when everything else is taught by a qualified expert? I think informing parents is the key thing. Once parents know what is happening, they are aghast, but they simply just don’t know what’s going on in the SRE classroom.”*

Byrne supports this analysis, with migrant parents in her survey explaining that children of different colours already stand out. They want their kids to fit in and not draw further attention by sitting out of SRE.

Byrne said:

*“I think the strongest messaging for parents is outlining that they want their children to be capable and equipped, but what they’re getting in religious instruction is really limiting and potentially distorting their child’s potential for understanding their world.”*

‘Stridently maintaining these practises, policies and protocols may have been appropriate in a different century’

## WHAT ARE THE SUPPOSED BENEFITS OF SPECIAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

In NSW, there are organised, well-resourced SRE lobby groups with full-time paid employees who argue the benefits of scripture. During meetings in NSW Parliament with Labor and Liberal leaders (2018–2022), the groups argued SRE can support multiculturalism and the discussion of traumatic events such as the Christchurch massacre. They also presented a controversial research paper on a limited study of five schools (two in Sydney and three in Melbourne) in which 55 students were interviewed, all of whom were Jewish. In contrast, 90 per cent of SRE is delivered by Christian providers (Gross & Rutland, ca. 2018). Halafoff debunked the findings of this study in the *Teachers not Preachers* webinar:

*“It was a very small study looking at Jewish [Special Religious Instruction]. They did find that Jewish [Special Religious Instruction] created a safe space in government schools for Jewish children whose parents couldn’t afford to send them to Jewish day schools. You could probably say the same thing for other minority programs such as Buddhist or Hindu SRE. The problem here is that there’s no reason why these should be running during school time. These types of activities can be conducted within religious communities themselves, or in school but outside school hours.” (Halafoff in Shoebridge, 2020)*

## REVIEWS

All Australian states conducted reviews of religious education in the 1970–80s, and all came to similar conclusions: denominational religious instruction (SRE in NSW) is no longer appropriate and should be replaced by General Religious Education. In NSW, the Rawlinson Report 1980, recommended that General Religious Education progressively replace SRE. In 2015, the Department commissioned a review of SRE and Special Education in Ethics in NSW government schools. It withheld the findings for nearly two years and then failed to implement several key recommendations in relation to compliance and monitoring of SRE providers. The review noted that no providers had lost their approval even though the Department had dealt with numerous instances of noncompliance.

## HOW CAN SPECIAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION STILL BE IN SCHOOLS?

The legislation is prescriptive, problematic and simply hasn’t been changed. In fact, the wording has hardly altered since its inception in 1880. In 2014, Dr Cathy Byrne wrote:

*“Surely the last bell has rung on the religiously segregated public-school room. It is time to expel all forms of single-faith religious instruction, special religious access pervades and Christian dominance from secular education.” (Byrne, 2014, p. 269)*

Almost 10 years on and the situation is much worse. Why? Data from my interviewees cited misunderstanding, lack of action, coordinated right-wing campaigns and fear.

Yes, fear in 21st century Australia. Some religious leaders and parents fear the possibility of children learning traditions outside of their own faith. Some educators fear being labeled too religious or too atheist. Some bureaucrats and curriculum writers avoid the word ‘religion’ because both historically and in recent times, it has related to bigotry and child abuse. Politicians fear the perceived electoral fallout of changing laws that have been in place for more than a century. Concerningly, Byrne said:

*“Religion, thus disenfranchised, enters public schools under the radar and in the shadows. Religion, like any school subject, should be entering through the main gates where we can all keep an eye on it. Odd things can happen in the shadows. Fear is a dead weight on the hopeful journey of education. It is a poor basis for determining policy and an ideological minefield when applied to classroom practice.” (Byrne, 2014, pp. 15-16)*

## CHANGE IS HERE: A UNIFIED POSITION

During the preparation of this report, and for the first time ever in NSW, there is a unified educational alliance — Primary Principals’ Association, Secondary Principals’ Council, the NSW Teachers Federation and the NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations — arguing that SRE simply must go, or at the very least not interfere with curriculum time. For the first time ever, there is also a consensus about how this would logistically work in schools (see recommendation 6).

Success has already been achieved with a change to the school enrolment form requiring students and their families to 'opt in' to SRE, which is clarified in the Department's policy and in Parliament records. This ended the enrolment form wars, which involved Independent MLC Fred Nile using his balance of power vote to allow the state government to sell-off our power system in exchange for a promotion of SRE on the enrolment form. This deal resulted in many students being placed in SRE classes without explicit consent from their parents. Since the change, student participation numbers in SRE have dropped significantly, and for this reason the lobby groups are trying to have automatic enrolment reinstated. In other states and countries, the change to 'opt in' at enrolment is seen as the key first step in the removal of SRE.

For the first time ever, there is a successful precedent to follow; chapter 5 analyses how Victoria successfully removed SRE from school time.

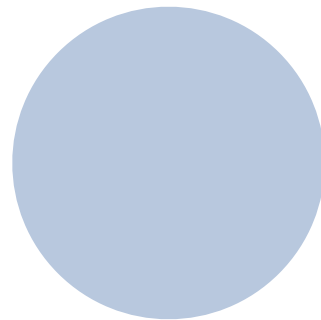
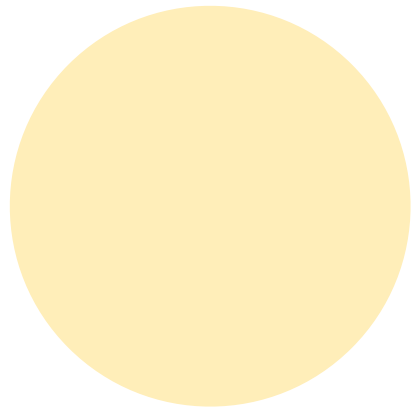
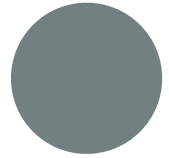
There is nothing more powerful than when an idea's time has come, and in NSW the time has come. The options are clear. Do we want our students learning about religion:

- as part of General Religious Education, with students taught about world beliefs in an inclusive setting, by a qualified teacher in a curriculum that promotes harmony and tolerance; or
- continuation of the current system of sectarian instruction that academics describe as no longer fit for the inclusive modern-day classroom and a waste of valuable learning time?

The answer is again best summed up in one provider's own words:

*"Primary school children, those aged 5-12 years are NINE times more likely to accept Christ as their Saviour than people 12 years and above ... We need to make the most of every opportunity (Colossians 4:5) ... Let's be faithful with this fantastic open door we have been given (Luke 16:10)!" (C3 Syd., n.d.b)*

As Fairness in Religion in Schools outlines, it's time we close the door.





# SCHOOL CHAPLAINCY PROGRAM: THE WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

In an extract from a book on how to infiltrate schools, titled *The chaplaincy phenomena*, Scripture Union Queensland former chief executive officer Duncan Brown describes chaplaincy as:

*“[A] feeder ministry — it is a way of directly targeting potential Christians and bringing them to God and the church environment. If we don’t spend time investing in this ministry now, our churches will suffer the consequences of an ageing population base unable to support its initiatives ... A way we can continue to do this is to institute a chaplaincy program into the curriculum of every government school in Australia.” (Kabamba, 2007, endorsement by Brown, back cover)*

Scripture Union is the biggest provider of chaplains in Australia. A self-confessed evangelical organisation, it is also a registered chaplaincy provider for NSW schools.

Tim Mander, another former Scripture Union Queensland chief executive officer, states in the same book:

*“School chaplaincy is one of the most exciting developments in Christian ministry in recent times. To have a full-time Christian presence in government schools in this ever-increasingly secular world is an unbelievable privilege. Here is the church’s opportunity to make a connection with the one place through which every young person must pass — our schools.” (Kabamba, 2007, foreword by Mander, p. 8)*

The National Chaplaincy Program is one of the most controversial and biggest breaches of our secular

wall. In 2006, when the program was introduced, the Australian Education Union (AEU) condemned the program. President (2008–2015) Angelo Gavrielatos, said: “The AEU has considered the Chaplaincy Program a misguided program from its inception. Apart from undermining our secular traditions, this additional funding should have been allocated to schools to better meet the educational needs of students with trained, specialist staff” (Australian Education Union, 2014).

Federation has long-standing policy opposing the program that, courtesy of successive Labor and Liberal governments, has to date cost taxpayers well in excess of \$1 billion.

Since its inception, there have also been two legal challenges by Queensland father Ron Williams. He successfully argued that the federal government’s agreement to fund Scripture Union Queensland chaplains in public schools was unlawful.

## THE RON WILLIAMS STORY

It was fitting that I met Ron Williams in Toowoomba (often referred to as Australia’s Bible belt) at the University of Southern Queensland, where he is studying law. A musician, Williams and his family were living in the US in the George W. Bush era in the early 2000s when they became concerned about the growing religious interference in government and the polarisation of America. They decided to return to Australia to bring up their children in a more secular school environment. Instead, according to Williams and other concerned parents who contacted him,

opting out of special religious instruction resulted in their children suffering negative experiences such as being left in broom closets; picking up rubbish and similar menial tasks; chaplains suggesting that girls should be raised to serve their man; and school halls being used on Sundays as a place of worship or healing service.

Outraged by this, he complained to the school, contacted the Queensland Department of Education, lobbied MPs and talked to the media but no change occurred. In 2009, Williams travelled to Sydney to join protesters against World Youth Day. He was introduced to the legal team who were opposing federal funding for the Pope's visit as part of World Youth Day. The team advised that in their legal opinion, funding of religious chaplains in public schools was potentially unconstitutional.

Interestingly, Michael Kirby was one of three High Court judges assigned to the World Youth Day case. He was the only judge who dissented (meaning he thought the case had merit to be heard) and the only judge who had attended a public school. Kirby said it was a huge amount of taxpayer money, but the case was rejected because of reference to the Defence of Government Schools ruling (DOGS case). Kirby argued that the case should be heard because it was an important issue and that courts are able to reconsider matters 20 and 30 years later. Contrary to his wishes, his reasons for dissenting weren't published, denying the public the opportunity to consider his reasons for opposing the issue. Publishing both supporting and dissenting judgments is the usual practice in High Court cases.

Williams V Commonwealth was the first attempt in Australian legal history to test the Constitution's no religious education test clause. Williams' legal team argued there was no federal legislation, as required under the Constitution, to justify the expenditure for the funding of religious chaplains. They also argued that the federal funding of religious chaplains in public schools contravened the religious test for an office under section 116 of the Constitution. In 2012, the court ruled six to one in favour that the Commonwealth's funding of chaplains was invalid. While winning the case overall, the second argument was lost on the technicality, that "chaplains did not hold an

'office' under the Commonwealth". Instead, the funding went to Scripture Union Queensland directly. They employed the chaplains, not the Commonwealth. (Williams v Commonwealth, 2012)

Rather than scrap the policy, five days later the then prime minister Julia Gillard and education minister Peter Garrett rushed through emergency legislation that included paying Scripture Union Queensland more than \$6.2 million. According to Williams, the Gillard government was effectively laundering taxpayers' money to religious organisations through third-party agreements.

In a 2014 High Court challenge, Williams successfully argued that the funding of chaplaincy programs was beyond the executive power of the Commonwealth. In a majority decision the court ruled the arrangements unlawful, and that chaplains were of no benefit to students under the law. After the outcome, and on behalf of its branches across Australia, the then Australian Education Union federal president Gavrielatos called on the government to rethink the program's future, saying it undermined the secular traditions of state schools, and that the students would be better served by "expert trained school counsellors". (Hurst, 2014)

Again, rather than scrapping the program, the Abbott federal government re-routed the funding from the Commonwealth to the states in a series of non-binding agreements. This was despite the chaplaincy program not providing any identifiable positive outcomes or justifications for its existence. The program still remains unfettered by statute and oversight and when introduced to Parliament there had been no scrutiny or consultation. No wonder the judges ruled: "The provision of chaplaincy services at a school therefore cannot be characterised as falling within the meaning of 'benefits to students' in section 51(xxiiiA)." (Ryall, 2015, p. 113)

The fact that the challenge occurred, and the arguments were aired publicly, make this an important moment in Australia's secular history. This father had, at great personal expense, taken on the establishment and won, not once but twice. Williams was able to garner significant public debate about the role of religion in schools in Australia; a debate that proved secularism is still an important factor in the Australian consciousness and psyche.

# 'Chaplaincy ... appears to be a self-regulatory system'

## HAPPY CHAPPIES

The introduction of the chaplaincy program in 2006 was a game changer for Special Religious Education (SRE) and chaplaincy providers, basically turning state volunteers into federal government employees and interconnecting SRE, chaplaincy and religious programs, such as Hillsong's *Shine*.

The chaplaincy idea even came from a scripture instructor and pastor in Victoria, who told the then-Liberal minister Greg Hunt how wonderful it would be if evangelical missionaries could be placed in every public school in the electorate of Flinders. The Coalition expanded that idea throughout Australia, meaning many religious organisations now no longer even need to cover SRE marketing or salaries (Maddox, 2014).

Dr Cathy Byrne outlined how Scripture Union Queensland chaplain numbers rose from 240 to 600 in the weeks after prime minister John Howard's 2006 announcement. She explained that of the \$50 per hour committed through federal funds, chaplains earned around \$16, leaving \$34 per hour for management fees, enabling Scripture Union Queensland to purchase a Brisbane city office building in 2010. Ron Williams' High Court challenge threatened funding of \$6 million annually (all of which is tax exempt). By 2013, Scripture Union Queensland had a staff of almost 1000, 76 of these being administrative or managerial positions.

In NSW, Byrne also revealed a similar funding connection between SRE and chaplaincy. She analysed statements made by the Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools, noting that the chaplaincy program's financial arrangements made it possible for religious instructors to access the school full time, rather than once a week. So, they could, in their own words, "form long-term friendships with students and

become a fixture in the school and then be in a position to act not only as SRE teachers, but as volunteers responsible to, and supervised by, their principal, to take on extracurricular activities, invite local church youth ministers to lessons or events, teen camps, and engage generally with school activities" (Byrne, 2014, p. 154). The Department estimates that the Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools represents about 80 per cent of all Christian SRE teachers across NSW including 13 different Christian faith groups.

Similarly to SRE, there are numerous controversies surrounding chaplains. The following articles give a snapshot of what may be occurring on school grounds with a chaplain:

- *The Sydney Morning Herald*, "Chaplain who told boys to rate girls had a history of 'extreme Christianity'" (Baker, 2021)
- *The Sydney Morning Herald*, "Anti-gay chaplains driving children to self-harm" (Knott, 2014).
- ABC: "Chaplains accused of pushing religion in schools" (*Chaplains accused*, 2011)

*The Guardian* reported (Karp, 2018b) Scripture Union Queensland was the subject of a complaint to the Tax Office over potentially breaching its tax deductibility status of \$33 million in donations. The complaint notes that the deductible gift-recipient status of Scripture Union Queensland's schools ministry fund depends on it being for the "furtherance of religious instruction in government schools in Australia". However, the chaplaincy program is supposedly based on pastoral care, not religious education. In this sense, religious organisations such as Scripture Union Queensland, Generate Ministries (the largest NSW chaplaincy provider) and Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools seem to be religious when they can get a tax deduction yet distance their connection with religion to gain approval to run programs in schools.

Chaplaincy also appears to be a self-regulatory system. In the National School Chaplaincy Guidelines for NSW arrangements 2020–22, there is no mention of any formal conduct or efficiency guidelines upon which chaplains are being assessed. Chaplains are not allowed to proselytise. Instead, their role is to provide general spiritual and personal advice. However, there is no mention of any repercussions if they do and there is also no mention of 'evangelising', which was prohibited in previous federal National School Chaplaincy Program Guidelines.

## SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

Groups involved with mental health, including the Australian Psychological Society, have repeatedly objected to the chaplaincy program. They are concerned that chaplains are engaged in several activities to support children with mental health issues that require the training and qualifications of professional psychologists. Australian Education Union Federal President Correna Haythorpe warned in a media release:

*“The National School Chaplaincy Program has been shown time and time again to be a thinly veiled cover for an ideological push to get religion into public schools. School chaplains are not qualified to provide mental health and wellbeing support to students. These funds would be far better used for the employment of qualified and accredited school counsellors in public schools.” (AEU, 2021)*

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

As impressive as Williams’ wins in the High Court were, further legal challenges to the Constitution at present appear to be unlikely. However, because each state now signs an individual agreement with the federal government for chaplaincy funding, strategic opportunities and fault lines in the system can be created. This is important as NSW’s chaplaincy agreement for 2023–26 is due to be negotiated.

In 2019, the ACT decided to withdraw its participation in the chaplaincy program because it didn’t align with its secular education system. Victoria also had success in the same year with a case supported by the Rationalist Society of Australia, represented by Luke Beck, which argued successfully that chaplaincy employment advertisements were discriminatory. In June 2022, Labor announced that the Albanese Government would give schools a choice of hiring a chaplain or professionally-qualified welfare officer. Although ending the compulsory religious aspect of the chaplaincy program is a positive, the announcement doesn’t go far enough and raises a number of issues. Extreme care would need to be taken to avoid unintentional consequences of promoting youth workers or unqualified secular pastoral care workers at the expense of school counsellors. Youth workers, secular pastors and chaplains are not qualified to give the psychological support that more and more of our students need. We want the best quality mental health care to support our students, not a cheap alternative.

With these considerations in mind, it is strategically more appropriate to focus time and energy on reinvigorating a national campaign to remove the chaplaincy program completely and, at a state level, promote school counsellors as part of Federation’s More Than Thanks campaign.

## NATIONAL CAMPAIGN

At a federal level, the chaplaincy program was “extended on a permanent basis”, as Scott Morrison put it in his 2018 Budget speech. In 2021, some Coalition MPs even wanted to increase funding to help address concerns that climate activism was causing mental health problems for Australian children. Assistant youth minister Luke Howarth said: “Climate activism is alarmist and does cause mental health problems for young people that could be helped by chaplains” (Karp, 2021). *The Chaser* responded best when it tweeted: “As the Liberal Government announces they will be addressing climate change by increasing the number of school chaplains, the nation satirists announce they will be taking the rest of the week off” (*The Chaser*, 2021). If this wasn’t such a serious matter and threat to our secular traditions, the tweet would be a lot funnier.

The Australian Education Union has been proactive in the media, publicly opposing the chaplaincy campaign. I discussed with President Correna Haythorpe the development of a national campaign opposing the school chaplaincy program and an AEU policy position paper on religious education in schools.

Although this may be a long-term campaign, recent developments including a possible independent review (Daniel, 2021), the negotiation of new state funding agreements (most likely 2022, again with few details) and growing community support, involving equal opportunity activism and parental petitions, represent opportunities to raise awareness and build alliances.

These developments, both positive and negative, highlight the need for a national strategy. This should be prioritised for all teacher unions and is a key recommendation of this report. Every effort must be made to view the new agreement when it is circulated to state and territory governments, and to lobby for its demise. As Williams outlined: “Qualified school counsellors are exactly what is required, we just need more of them.”



# SEEDING: THE COVERT HARVEST OF OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Seeding is a word that both academics and activists have used to describe what is occurring in our public education system. The chaplain, or the Special Religious Education (SRE) teacher, plants a seed which then grows into a prayer room or club at recess, seminars, church use of the school hall on weekends, subtle religious material promoting activities on school websites or in newsletters and even religion-based well-being programs.

The Department chooses minimal regulation of these activities. It leaves all responsibility to the principal and, when contacted, uses a common ‘fob-off line’, referring to it as a local school decision. I interviewed Maria Delaney, a teacher, consultant and departmental project officer, to address gender dimensions and disadvantages. Delaney said the groups that run these programs are all connected and are very careful not to leave any overtly religious fingerprints, while the Department just turns a blind eye. Parents, and sometimes principals, aren’t even aware it’s a sly marketing campaign.

In fact, seeding may be too mild a word. Delaney calls it “infiltration” and author and social commentator Jane Caro calls it “indoctrination”. Either way, the concern is that local public schools can go from a secular haven to a mission field. Academics Maddox and Byrne support this analysis and are highly critical of the hands-off regulation approach from the Department. They highlight how some schools (through the chaplain, SRE instructor, or

both) can form a type of community partnership with a church. Materials handed out and information included in the school newsletter normalises the church presence and opens dangerous soft entry points both inside and outside the school gates. Maddox said: “You won’t see any written documentation of their agenda or the content, it is usually summarised with friendly words, under an innocuous banner but the content or the instructor might be delivering a hardcore fundamentalist message.”

Interestingly named, *Hardcore Christians* is one of the programs that runs in schools. Others include *Jesus Car Racing*, *Life Choices*, *Shine* and *Strength*. These programs are offered under various headings as part of the chaplaincy program, as an alternative to school sport, as part of the school-student welfare program or during SRE.

The Department does have guidelines to regulate the more overt programs such as *Jesus Car Racing*, which is detailed under voluntary student activities of a religious nature in schools. This policy outlines that schools must be neutral places for objective study, bans proselytising and requires parental consent before participation. However, the more subtle programs, often disguised as focusing on wellbeing, are getting around these guidelines by removing direct references to religion. These programs focus on self-esteem and confidence building, targeting some of our most emotionally and socially vulnerable students by building trust and exploiting the situation to pursue their own ideological agendas.

## SHINE AND STRENGTH PROGRAMS

*Shine* is a program developed by Hillsong specifically for girls and is perhaps the perfect example of seeding. There is a similar program for boys (also by Hillsong), contrastingly titled *Strength*. There are no public records of how many schools run these programs, but they appear to be quite prevalent as evidenced in school newsletters and on school websites. Alarming, the pro-forma information to parents contains no mention that the programs are designed by a religious organisation or that Hillsong is involved and runs another program with the same name for its congregation.

To analyse the programs appropriately, I purchased the *Shine* and *Strength* facilitator handbooks and student course booklets from Hillsong, as they aren't made available to parents or through school channels (Hillsong International, 2020a, 2020b). The first page of both publications contains an ominous warning: The "use of this handbook and running the program is entirely at your own risk" (Hillsong International, 2020a, 2020b copyright page). The introduction outlines that the *Shine Girl* program is committed to the quality teaching and leadership framework but makes no tangible connection as to how it does this. Seeding is often used as a metaphor. For example: "Our potential is often in seed form, the seeds inside us are limitless, each seed has the potential to grow and become everything it was meant to be" (Hillsong International, 2020a, p. 123). Subtle messaging appears frequently around girls being weak, vulnerable, and nudging them towards subservience and abstinence. For example: "my strength comes from when I use my self-control" (Hillsong International, 2020a, p. 84). Indeed, it seems for girls, their strength comes from looking pretty, making so-called good choices, and not having sex. This is summed up by activities outlined in the appendices of the *Shine* facilitators handbook, which include hair care, etiquette, table settings and tips for the dinner table.

In complete contrast, the Hillsong *Strength* program does not include any of these activities, instead focusing on sports, mateship, teamwork, resilience and work. Chapter titles include: 'Too tough to get rough', 'Power Balance', 'Live the Adventure', 'Man for the Dream' and 'Leave Your Mark'. There are sessions on pornography, controlling temper and the

dangers of drugs and alcohol. *Strength* positions boys in terms of power, success, work, tending to anger and needing to exercise restraint, implying that a tendency to aggression is a biological fact rather than an aspect of socially constructed hegemonic masculinity. When read side by side, the differences between *Shine* and *Strength* are stark, the Hillsong message clear and the question of why it is considered that boys don't need to know about setting the table, hair care and etiquette, not explained.

## ANALYSIS

Academics conclude these programs are purposefully designed to promote narrow gender stereotypes and cultural norms. Dr Cathy Byrne described them as "religiously flavoured"; girls-only make-up and hygiene activities that connect with evangelist off-campus clubs and intensive Jesus boot camps for boys.

Maria Delaney, who has published an article on *Shine*, said the programs are clearly promoting narrow gender stereotypes and toxic masculinity.

Delaney said:

*"It's a narrow binary view that is very theologically grounded. But it's also so deliberately subversive. The agenda is for facilitators to develop influence through their relationships with the girls to involve them in activities 'outside the system' where agendas aren't restrained."*

Delaney said there are lots of other similar programs in schools with different names such as Bella Girls, but they all have similar themes in the way they teach girls to be handmaids and the boys to be warriors and heroes.

Professor Marion Maddox also reviewed a previous version of *Shine* and was shocked that it's still running and that there is no disclosure of it being a Hillsong program. The content has a paternalistic and patronising tone towards women.

Maddox said:

*"Even if it doesn't mention God from start to finish, it's this sort of theologically grounded view of masculinity and femininity that I would have thought was counter to an empowering girls message that public schooling usually promotes."*

Jane Caro believes *Shine* is, in part, a reaction to the success of feminism. The conservative cultural stereotype is losing ground, that's why these organisations operate secretly. That's why they run their programs almost in a proto-feminist guise, because they realise that the old rhetoric of the submissive girl no longer plays, and it doesn't play with anybody.

Caro said:

*"Feminism is roaring. I've never in my life seen it as successful as it is now. Millions and millions of women all over the world telling their stories about what has happened to them, is so powerful. Programs like Shine are designed to make girls feel ashamed. It's not our shame."*

In reviewing *Shine* and *Strength*, it is obvious that these programs clearly limit students by seeking to exclude and denigrate anyone who does not fit with the narrow stereotype, including students who identify as gender non-binary.

Surely, no so-called wellbeing program operating in public schools should promote a view of masculinity or femininity that is not inclusive and respectful of all students. Surely, the Department and government must meet their obligation to provide quality curriculum programs, designed and delivered by teachers, so that we can support students learning and wellbeing in a unified and consistent way.

## EFFECT ON OUR STUDENTS AND SOCIETY

Teachers are constantly justifying programs and grades, but when it is an external organisation, where is the transparency? It is completely absent.

There are obvious dangers on a practical level. A student may attend one of these programs in school and then a linked event outside the school gates. The external program has no limitations on what is presented.

At an existential level, the analysis asks some challenging questions. If generation after generation is participating in these programs and SRE, is it really any surprise that neo-liberalism, right-wing conservative ideology and religious fundamentalism is growing in our society? What effect is this having on our campaigns and progressive policy?

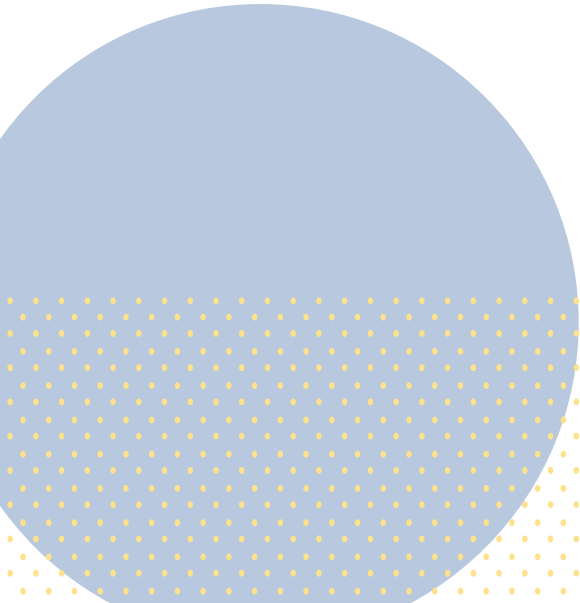
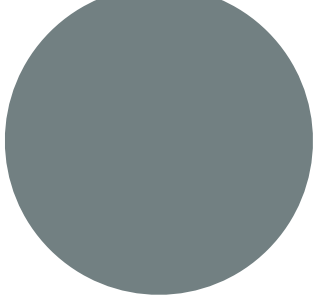
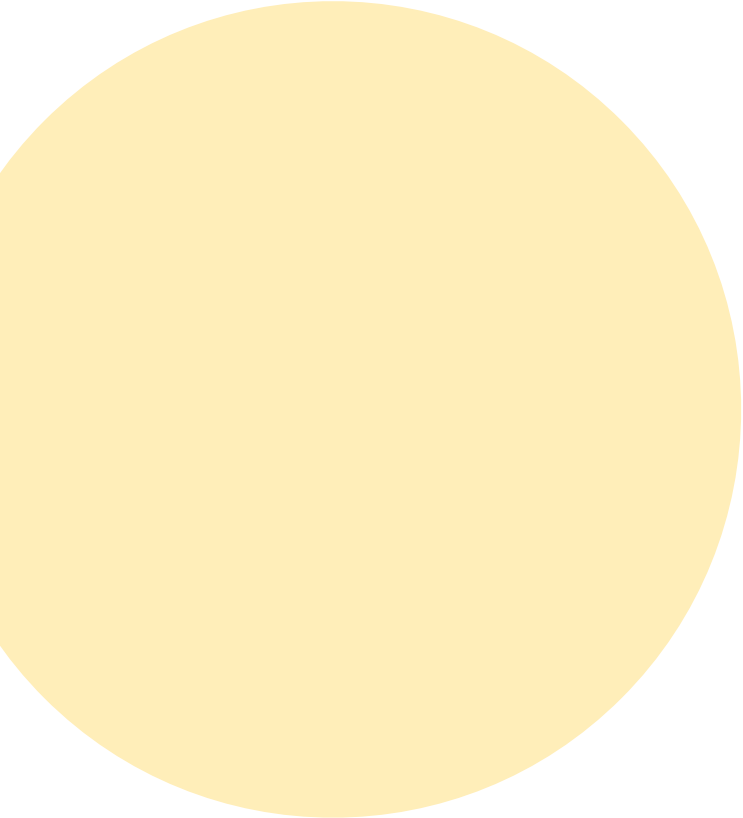
Delaney said cultural hegemony plays a significant role in toxic masculinity and narrow gender stereotypes that these programs perpetuate.

*"Teachers, trainers, educators, bureaucrats, everybody: we need to be able to put that critical lens on to understand where the messages are coming from, what the agenda is, what are the values being espoused, and what's the potential impact. Even if the chaplain or SRE teacher is nice, what is the bigger picture?"*

Gender violence and violence against women are important contemporary topics but are not mentioned in these programs, which perpetuate polite submissiveness.

Former Australian of the Year and activist Grace Tame spoke about the dangers of this cultural norm and submissiveness when she said on her Twitter feed: "The survival of abuse culture is dependent on submissive smiles and self-defeating surrenders. It is dependent on hypocrisy" (Tame, 2022). Anyone who has felt pressure to be 'nice' and 'polite' in the face of patronising nastiness can recognise the truth of this statement.

The discussion and analysis of these issues goes beyond the scope of this report but do warrant further attention. Religion in education, like class and privilege, is a complex matter that is under-researched and often considered too difficult to discuss. It is, of course, the Department's responsibility (see recommendation 5) to regulate the sector. If left unaddressed, these issues will continue to affect our profession, our campaigns and our country.



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# VICTORIA: A CASE STUDY OF HOPE

In relation to Victoria's campaign to remove Special Religious Education (SRE), former High Court judge and Order of Australia recipient Michael Kirby told me :

*"I said at the time, 'You're wasting your time. That was a big compromise in the 19th century. Nothing's going to change, it'll never be altered.' They persisted and they got the support of parents, and it was altered. It's important, where you think you have justice and fairness on your side, to be courageous [emphasis added]. So maybe you've got to see what you can learn from the Victorian experience and why it succeeded in Victoria and whether that has lessons for NSW."*

Travel and research during COVID have been difficult, but with these passionate words in my ears I was fortunate to visit Victoria, where the campaign pressured the Government to remove Special Religious Instruction (the Victorian equivalent of SRE) out of formal classroom teaching time. Religious instruction is now highly regulated and only offered before or after school, or in lunch breaks. Subsequently, the numbers have free-fallen and Special Religious Instruction is close to extinction. In fact, the Victorian department of education is hardly aware of it running at all. Significantly, the legislation did not change; the Andrews Labor Government implemented a ministerial direction that forced the policy change.

## UNION ACTION

In 1928, Victoria's landmark secular legislation of 1872 was repealed to allow for segregated religious instruction. Along with Fairness in Religion in Schools and other groups, the Victorian Education

Union has been campaigning for a return to the secular principle of education. I interviewed Briley Stokes, Vice President (Primary Sector), to develop and share ideas and strategies. In doing so, I realised how little we do this as state teacher unions (see recommendation 2 from this report). Stokes stressed the importance of a strategic plan, choosing the right time to action a plan and the right set of circumstances.

Stokes advised that a unifying theme was important. "For the AEU Victoria branch and its members, it was all about time," she said; time with respect to workload, a crowded curriculum and Special Religious Instruction being outdated. A similar focus and a slogan would certainly resonate in NSW, with teachers constantly raising time as an issue. This would align with Federation's More Than Thanks campaign and the Department's commitment to "clear the decks for schools so they can focus on addressing students' longer-term educational impacts" (NSW Department of Education, 2022). Release time, not religious instruction, is exactly what is required and possible with the removal of SRE.

## VICTORIAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

In contrast to NSW, Department officials in Victoria, Kris Arcaro and Caitlin Greenwell (directly working in this field), were happy to assist. Both described the removal of Special Religious Instruction as the highlight of their professional careers, and probably the most important public service work they had ever done. The following gives a description of how the changes came about in Victoria from a departmental perspective.

## STAGE 1: AWARENESS CAMPAIGN AND BUILDING ALLIANCES

Significantly, changes started with a conservative government that had no interest in reforming or removing Special Religious Instruction. Instead, then-education minister Martin Dixon wanted to expand religious influence by allowing religious groups to run programs at lunch. The Victorian department agreed but noted that because these proposed programs were, in fact, Special Religious Instruction they needed to go through the formal processes.

These processes stopped many programs and provided some visibility around the content and materials used. At that time, Pentecostal groups were running most programs with a very heavy Christian religious bias. Fairness in Religion in Schools were doing much of the initial work around compliance and the Department checked Fairness in Religion in Schools' Facebook page every day to see which schools they had named and shamed. This built awareness around what was going on in schools because Fairness in Religion in Schools had access to a network of parents who were raising the alarm.

Fairness in Religion in Schools in NSW use the same compliance strategy for SRE providers and schools that are not following the correct procedures. In contrast to Victoria, there is no support from the NSW Department of Education to follow up. On the contrary, when Fairness in Religion in Schools reposted an SBS article that reported comments from an SRE instructor and pastor that Islam is a sin, the Department referred Fairness in Religion in Schools to the counter-terrorism unit. Of course, no action was taken, either by the Department or the counter-terrorism unit and the particular Baptist SRE provider in question is still operating in NSW schools.

What Fairness in Religion in Schools discovered, both in Victoria and NSW, was that SRE/Special Religious Instruction had become a platform for recruitment. They were alarmed at how connected and influenced the Coalition government was to these religious organisations. Providers had gone on a recruitment drive with the lunchtime programs. In my opinion, Access Ministries CEO Dr Evonne Paddison overreached when she said the real purpose of Christian ministry in schools, both chaplaincy and Special Religious Instruction, was to "make disciples" (Paddison, 2008, as cited in Byrne, 2014, p. 167).

## STAGE 2: REGULATION AND POLICY REFORM

The controversy over Paddison's comment and growing community awareness created intense political pressure on the Victorian education minister, who in 2014 issued a ministerial direction. This clarified that principals *must* offer Special Religious Instruction if an accredited instructor approaches the school, but they can refuse when the school doesn't have the staff or space.

The direction also stated that instructors must not offer enticements of any kind, including gifts, stickers or lollies. This was necessary because it was discovered that students were often only attending to receive gifts. Materials or content in conflict with departmental policy or the curriculum were also not allowed. This included anti-LGBTIQ materials and creationism. Finally, it required that a parent must actively opt-in to Special Religious Instruction for their children. If parents/carers don't respond their children are assumed not to be in Special Religious Instruction.

Basically, the department did their job and tightened up the contractual obligations making it clear that if there was any evidence that the instructor had done any of these things, they would no longer be allowed to deliver Special Religious Instruction. These simple changes resulted in a significant drop in Special Religious Instruction participation numbers. The Victorian department estimates that in the space of three years the percentage of students undertaking Special Religious Instruction dropped from 90 per cent to below 20 per cent.

This shows that regulation is important. According to Marion Maddox, in *Taking God to School: The End of Australia's Egalitarian Education* (2014):

*"In 2012 Access Ministries alone sent 3200 volunteers into public schools to give Special Religious Instruction classes to 120,000 students in 850 of Victoria's 1300 primary schools."*

All these changes happened under a Conservative government and occurred because the Department exercised due diligence. This is exactly what Fairness in Religion in Schools and Federation have been asking the NSW Department of Education to implement. The Department is choosing not to.

### STAGE 3: CREATING A PERFECT STORM, LOBBYING, ACTIVISM AND MEDIA

In Victoria, it seems, a series of significant events helped to create a perfect storm for change. In 2012, three parents mounted an unsuccessful but highly publicised legal challenge on the grounds that Special Religious Instruction classes discriminate against children who have opted out. Fairness in Religion in Schools and organisations such as the Rationalist Society of Australia over many years were relentlessly activating parents. They maintained a constant presence in the media including large billboards in the city and surrounds.

Principal groups were agitating for change as there was an underlying sentiment that they continued to be held over a barrel by the religious providers. Fairness in Religion in Schools tapped into this discontent and encouraged Joe Kelly, principal of Cranbourne South Primary School, to examine the content and delivery of Special Religious Instruction classes. He subsequently banned Special Religious Instruction at his school. As reported in *The Age*, he had been “blindly supporting” Access Ministries’ presence for 13 years. That was until he took a closer look at the actual classes and curriculum. “It is not education,” Mr Kelly said. “It has no value whatsoever. It is rubbish — hollow and empty rhetoric ... My school teachers are committed to teaching children, not indoctrinating them” (Marshall, 2014).

This built further awareness and a broad coalition of support. The late Professor Gary Bouma, an Anglican priest at Saint John’s Anglican Church in Malvern East and UNESCO chairman in Interreligious and Intercultural Relations, described the curriculum developed by Access Ministries as “appalling”. “Now, unfortunately, most of the Christians out there trying to train the next generation are putting them off with the kind of crap they serve” (Topsfield, 2011).

In 2015, the incoming Labor Government read the room and introduced the ministerial direction, formally removing Special Religious Instruction from formal class time. Now, Special Religious Instruction can only take place at lunch or before and after school. As soon as Special Religious Instruction moved out of school hours, numbers dropped again, although not completely. Schools with community

support can run Special Religious Instruction after school hours. (In NSW, this could be accommodated as Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics providers and any other religious or community groups are free to apply to use public schools as part of the Sharing of School Facilities Policy. In this scenario, Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics could easily occur at the end of the formal school day, which is the preferred model of the key NSW stakeholders.)

### IMPLICATIONS FOR NSW

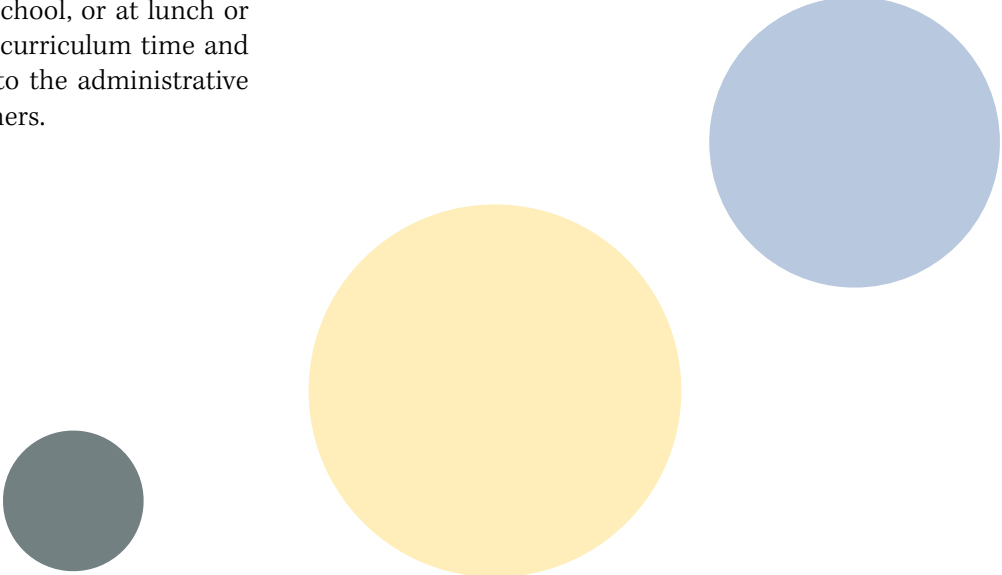
Victoria has created an important precedent. As part of this research project, I commissioned New Law, which kindly provided pro bono legal clarifications to the questions I raised. Most importantly, New Law solicitor Timothy Roberts advised that it was correct to suggest that there is nothing explicit in the specific sections of the Education Act 1990 (NSW) relating to SRE or Special Education in Ethics that would prohibit schools from providing these lessons at lunch, recess, directly before or directly after school. The legal advice also clarified that it is Department policy and not legislation that is preventing simple reforms. For example, there is nothing in the sections of the Education Act 1990 (NSW) relating specifically to SRE that prevents the Department from monitoring the content and delivery of SRE lessons and material to ensure alignment with Departmental policy.

There are some significant differences to the Victorian context. Most notably, the Victorian legislation is less prescriptive. The provider situation is also different; Access Ministries was the main provider in Victoria, but in NSW there are many, including Primary Ethics providing Special Education in Ethics.

This highlights the need for legislative change. Regulation and reform without a centralised campaign involving teachers and school communities risks legitimising Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics. This would negatively impact on the main goal of removing Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics completely from our school system. In Victoria, the ministerial direction still leaves students vulnerable to political whim and at the last election the Liberal party campaigned for a return to Special Religious Instruction. However, there is definite scope for NSW to adopt a similar policy.

Our legislation provides a maximum time for SRE, but there is no minimum. The legislation also outlines that time is to be allocated for SRE, not that providers dictate what time they want. We need collective action by activists supported by the union with principal leaders such as Joe Kelly, Federation Representatives, and teachers, parents and school communities working together to say enough is enough. This could be publicised via a motion calling on the Department to support schools in ensuring students' learning comes first (recommendation 10).

If it can happen in Victoria, it can happen in NSW. Under our current legislation, students could be attending Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics before or after school, or at lunch or recess without compromising curriculum time and learning outcomes or adding to the administrative burden on principals and teachers.



'My school teachers  
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indoctrinating them'



# FROM SECULAR TO SATAN: QUEENSLAND AND BEYOND

**F**rom Victoria, probably the most progressive state in this field, I travelled to Queensland, arguably the least secular. Remarkably, in Queensland the school principal can still deliver Christian Bible classes and Christian Religious Instruction, and it is the only state that removed the secular clause entirely from its education statutes. However, what Queensland does have in common with Victoria, NSW, Western Australia and other states is a committed group of parents leading the fight for secular education.

## QUEENSLAND PARENTS FOR SECULAR STATE SCHOOLS

Started in 2014, Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools consists of a core team of around 10 parent volunteers. They may be small in number but they are big in influence and have a large following on their website, in the media and with parents throughout Queensland. Alison Courtice, a lawyer and spokesperson for the group, said it took her three years to understand all the policy and legislation that Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools describes as “the dinosaur in the classroom that divides our kids and has legitimised Christian privilege for over 100 years”.

Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools shares ideas with Fairness in Religion in Schools, and successful strategies have included petitions tabled in Parliament calling for a full parliamentary review of Religious Instruction. They have also conducted a comprehensive survey of parents. The results of the survey revealed:

- 60 per cent of respondents oppose Religious Instruction in school hours

- 73 per cent were unaware that the content of Religious Instruction lessons is not approved or endorsed by the education department
- 87 per cent support the ability of students to continue with regular classwork if they are not participating in Religious Instruction
- 89 per cent disagreed that multiculturalism is best served by Religious Instruction.

A similar survey and collection of data would be very useful as part of an awareness campaign in NSW (see recommendation 9).

Perhaps most significantly, in 2016, Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools forced the education department to undertake a major review of the materials of three Religious Instruction providers.

Principal Mat Keon of Windsor State School was so concerned with the content of the Connect Religious Instruction material that he suspended the program in his school. (The Connect program is produced by a commercial arm of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney and is also widely used in NSW.)

In Queensland, it is a principal’s right to review programs but not to determine them. While the law requires that Religious Instruction be taught where available, and that materials are to be provided by the churches or associated bodies, the state retains the right to veto materials that do not meet its strict requirements.

Keon and Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools’ concerns sparked a Queensland government review of Religious Instruction materials and programs used in state schools. The findings of the

reviews were confronting. In particular, the report found that Connect materials:

- were inappropriate for the target age group (topics included murder, prostitution and animal sacrifice)
- may encourage undesirable child behaviours, such as the keeping of secrets and the formation of ‘special friendships’ with adults
- had the potential to affect the social and emotional wellbeing of particular students
- posed risks to health and safety, such as mixing bleach and cordial in front of children
- were aimed at converting students to Christianity.

These findings refer to the same Connect material used widely in NSW classrooms. The review forced the Anglican Church to change the Connect material. However, as (Darvall, 2018) reported: “Primary school scripture class teaches six-year-old children to mime being choked.” In the article, Youthworks, a subsidiary organisation that writes the Connect material maintains that this practice is appropriate, as students need “to understand the consequences if they turn away from God”.

Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools meet regularly with the Queensland government about Religious Instruction in schools and have been recognised as a key stakeholder. Courtice said that they have been carefully framing legislative change for Labor in positive terms. They have argued that legislative change is an opportunity for an historic moment in the state’s history. Queensland Labor has proudly decriminalised abortion and assisted dying laws because of the social benefits. Courtice asked: Why not Special Religious Instruction? Why not stand up for students and progressive education and in doing so, make history?

In NSW, we also need to convince politicians that framing the debate in terms of the positive benefits for students and community is better than the current reactive approach of doing nothing to reduce the potential for voter backlash. This framing may be of use with NSW Labor as, despite meetings with shadow ministers and leaders to highlight concerns and lobby for change, there has been minimal progress.

## NOOSA TEMPLE OF SATAN

In 2021/22, Noosa Temple of Satan took the Queensland Government to the Supreme Court over whether it is a religious denomination or society, under the Queensland Education Act, after it was denied access to teach Religious Instruction. If successful, the case would have created a significant precedent.

Presently in NSW, there is next to no oversight as to which organisations are approved to deliver Religious Instruction. The Department’s approval process lacks public transparency and contains no clear criteria for authorisation. Federation has consistently raised concerns about the approval process as part of the Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics consultative committee that is used by the Department to gain feedback on provider applications. In December 2021 Hillsong gained approval from the Department, despite ongoing self-governance and historical child protection matters before the courts.

On 3 March, 2021, MLC David Shoebridge asked the Department during a Budget estimates hearing whether there was a vetting process for providers after it was discovered that a right-wing Hindu group called the Vishwa Hindu Parishad Australia (VHPA, World Hindu Council) was delivering Special Religious Education (SRE) to students (“Evidence to Legislative Council Portfolio Committee”, 2021). Vishwa Hindu Parishad Australia (VHPA, World Hindu Council) was briefly listed as a religious militant organisation in the 2018 CIA World Factbook (“Evidence to Legislative Council Portfolio Committee”, 2021).

Department Secretary Georgina Harrison responded by suggesting that the Controversial Issues in Schools Policy deals with these issues. It is alarming that the most senior bureaucrat in the Department was not aware that this policy doesn’t apply to SRE, and the safeguards provided by the policy don’t protect children in SRE.

It is also an alarming reminder that the lack of oversight of SRE applies to all providers. For many migrants arriving in Australia, instead of multicultural education resolving conflicts and promoting peace, our segregated religious instruction may be exacerbating them. In this sense, we should be under no

illusion that sectarian conflict is being put aside at the school gates and that students are being taught tolerance and understanding during SRE.

Noosa Temple of Satan's lawyer Trevor Bell explained to me that several families in Queensland informed a school that their children were Satanists, and that the Temple of Satan met all the departmental requirements as a Religious Instruction provider. Despite this, the Temple of Satan was blocked from providing instruction. Bell said Noosa Temple of Satan's challenge wasn't really about belief in Satan. It is the fact that there are untrained, religious volunteers using government facilities to teach religion and waste precious learning time. The case attracted national and international attention and on Radio National Bell likened Australia's religious education policies to gun laws in America: it's dangerous and just doesn't make any sense.

The Satanists have taken a different approach to Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools, believing that ultimately, entrenched power will not roll over. This highlights the importance of multiple factors and approaches in organisational change. Although the result of the case, which was handed down in May 2022, ruled the Satanists are not a "religious denomination or society" as defined in the Religious Instruction provisions of the Education Act, the legal proceedings provided more scrutiny on the antiquated legislation and raised public debate over who gets to decide whether a religion is worthwhile or not. In prosecuting the case, the Queensland government's lawyers even argued that a successful challenge would mean significant inconvenience to the school as other children would have to be taken out of classes and not participate in their normal studies. This demonstrated that the government had briefed the Solicitor-General that this is exactly what happens every day in Religious Instruction.

## ALL OTHER STATES COMPARED

The laws in all states and territories allow for religious instruction in government schools. In the Northern Territory, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia, school authorities may provide special religious instruction but are not obliged to do so. However, in the ACT, NSW, Queensland and South Australia, the law requires that schools provide special religious instruction classes.

No state has defined the term "secular", but in many ways NSW legislation is the most prescriptive. South Australia does not have religious instruction as other states do. Instead, they have a provision for a half-day religious seminar once a term. In the ACT, parents may request religious education in a particular religion, but it is the parents' responsibility to organise the religious body to provide religious education. In Western Australia, the decision to host special religious education in the school is up to the principal in consultation with the school council or board. Even in Queensland, principals have the power and authority to review the curriculum, as seen with the Connect program.

NSW is the only state that has had scripture (SRE) in legislation since its inception and the only state to provide Special Education in Ethics classes alongside, or instead of, religious instruction if available. As Doig said: "If conservative NSW — the Texas of Australia — changed legislation, then the other states would fall like dominoes."

## AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Internationally, it would seem that Australia, once a world leader in secular education, has fallen behind. Described by academics in my interviews as being out of step, they believe our current segregated approach could have serious national security and multicultural impacts for generations to come.

Byrne is particularly critical, outlining that Australia's approach is archaic and if not addressed will affect social cohesion and our ability to compete with the rest of the world academically.

In most developed Western nations, a shift has occurred. First to a social science-based religious education, then to mandatory stand-alone, secular religious education. It is now uncommon and considered dangerous for religious groups to access state schools without oversight of curriculum design.

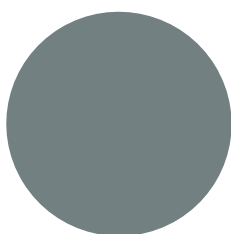
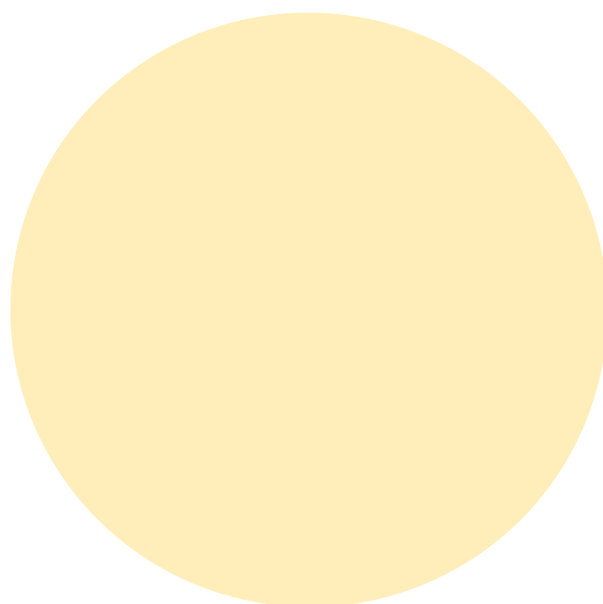
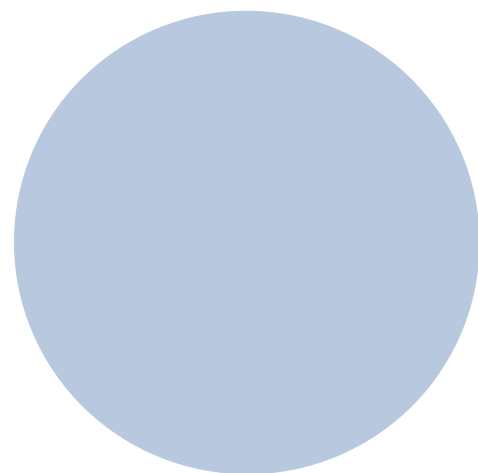
In comparison, Byrne sums up the academic consensus describing Australia's approach as outdated and limiting, particularly for minority religious groups and non-religious students in public schooling but also minority groups within the majority tradition, such as liberal Christians. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in international legal

cases has criticised and likened countries that still have a segregated, partial exemption process such as NSW to a 'ghetto approach' (Evans, 2008b, p. 470).

This international comparison is alarming and shows that in Australia, and particularly NSW, religious education is completely out of step with the rest of the world. General Religious Education is already in our curriculum and could potentially be expanded as the academics have been suggesting in curriculum reviews for decades. (Ironically, the lack of instruction time, in part caused by SRE, has meant that schools struggle to meet the whole curriculum and students may miss out on the full scope of General Religious Education). These calls have fallen on deaf ears with Conservative politicians and lobby groups getting in the way of any effective implementation of General Religious Education.

If General Religious Education is to be expanded, then religious groups could be some of the stakeholders and have input into General Religious Education content, which is occurring in England. However, expanding General Religious Education has been made difficult, due to the interference of politicians such as Mark Latham, as demonstrated by his use of parliamentary privilege to target public schools for teaching what he considers to be controversial parts of the curriculum.

Principal groups have argued that replacing SRE with another compulsory topic is not necessarily the best outcome. Principals and teachers know from their daily experience that schools need more time to do the whole curriculum justice and that General Religious Education is an important part of that curriculum. The solution, which Fairness in Religion in Schools consistently points out: just give the time back to the professionals.



'The other states  
would fall like  
dominoes'



# THE BATTLE FOR THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

Scott Morrison told a Christian conference that “he was called to do God’s work as prime minister” and said he “practises the tradition of ‘laying on of hands’ while working” (Martin, 2021). Paradoxically, survey results (Crabb, 2019) continue to show that Australia is not a country in which religious belief is the dominant determinant of identity, social status or even social activity. Why then, have recent cabinets and parliaments been so unrepresentative of society when it comes to religion?

Monash University Professor of Philosophy Graham Oppy said psychological studies have revealed that people seen to be without religion are considered more untrustworthy than people with religion. This perception has no correlation to reality but has a big impact on our political systems and our representation in Parliament. This stereotype and discriminatory bias is part of why the number of people believing in religion is declining, yet in contrast, the religious influence in politics is increasing.

The other reason is neoliberalism. Oppy explains that privatisation of so many social services to faith-based agencies and the convergence between business leaders, politicians and religious leaders means it is much harder to push an agenda of equality. Politicians are less likely to come out and say that they are secular when the rich, wealthy and powerful also include religious leaders and the church.

According to Professor Marion Maddox, another part of this political-religious narrative is the erosion of party ideology. She said that Labor no longer progressively stands for much, while the Liberal Party,

which champions the free market, wants to subsidise power stations. She said:

*“So, what do the parties stand for? Not a lot, but faith enables politicians to be able to demonstrate they stand for something because they belong to a church. It gives them an ability to appeal to something greater than themselves and creates a perception that they are not in politics for self-interest or pork barrelling.”*

This can be seen under Anthony Albanese’s leadership, with Labor consistently trying to court Christian groups and consulting extensively with religious leaders. Yet, the 2021 report *Religiosity in Australia* (Francis, 2021) commissioned by the Rationalist Society of Australia found economic perceptions, not religion, were the major factors determining how religious Australians voted in the 2019 federal election. State Labor, under Chris Minns and previously Jodi McKay, has taken a similar approach, meeting and appearing in photos at Parliament House with Special Religious Education (SRE) lobby groups in an effort to win votes.

Many believe Labor has totally misread the situation and is pandering to a phantom, invisible vote. The 2022 federal election result, which included a huge increase in female independents being elected, showed that progressive, working women (not a small but vocal religious lobby) are a much larger and more decisive voter base. The Greens, well known for their secular policies, also picked up seats in the election with Maddox’s research showing that the default party for

young Muslims was the Greens. She said when asked about marriage equality most said “that’s the state’s business. The law of the country is different from our religious views. We are concerned about and vote on environmental and asylum-seeker issues”.

The Liberals, on the other hand, have not been bluffed by a minority right-wing religious vote. They are reportedly in the process of a full-scale, evangelical takeover of the party, as outlined in various media outlets including *The Saturday Paper* (Seccombe, 2021). Many Liberal and National politicians now rely on right-wing Christian organisations for funding and other forms of support. Party memberships are so small that organised religious groups are joining party branches, using their numbers to significantly influence political outcomes. Even after his election loss, Scott Morrison gave his final words as prime minister to his church, quoting from the Bible instead of accounting to the Australian public.

These factors, as well as the growing influence on the Liberal party by organisations such as Hillsong, help explain a shift towards religious fundamentalism in Australia. Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) director-general Mike Burgess even stated: “We need to reflect why teenagers are hanging Nazi flags and pictures of the Christchurch massacre on their walls.” His concerns were still clearly evident when he later added, “radicalisation of minors is a major concern, it’s happening in the school yard”, and likened it to paedophilia (Burgess, 2022). In this context, the interconnection of the chaplaincy program, SRE and Shine-style programs, becomes more evident and our campaigns more pressing, as does the rise of religious schools and their lack of accountability.

## OUR UNFAIR FUNDING SYSTEM

In February 2022, the Centre for Public Education Research (CPER) ran a seminar, *Why Money Does Matter*, to mark the 10th anniversary of the Gonski recommendations into school funding. Expert analysis revealed Australia continues to maintain one of the highest concentrations of religious schools compared with other OECD countries. Approximately 30 per cent of all schools in Australia are affiliated with a religion and 94 per cent of private schools.

This system of segregating children along lines of class, wealth and religion, with large government sub-

sidies to private schools and little accountability, is unprecedented internationally. According to Maddox (2014), the media has largely focused on the proportion of public money going to elite and well-endowed private schools, but the fastest growing sector is the self-styled Christian schools. Jennifer Buckingham, from the Centre for Independent Studies, describes these schools as “‘fundamentalist’ Christian schools” (Buckingham, 2010, p. 5, as cited in Maddox, 2014, p. 88). Maddox is concerned that the philosophies underpinning some of these schools are far from benign.

One of Australia’s Exclusive Brethren schools has been described as an “extremist cult, which warns children to stay away from the outside world and bans its graduates from physically attending university” (Bagshaw, 2016). According to the article, the school receives more in government funding per student than up to a third of the state’s public schools. Citipointe Christian College’s financial statements for the year ended 2020 revealed more than \$15 million in recurrent government grants. In 2022, the principal/pastor introduced contracts demanding families sign a “statement of faith”, which described homosexual acts as “immoral” and “offensive to God”.

Not all religious schools like Citipointe have such extremist views, or a 2000-seat auditorium with a large commercial cafe, book shops, a skateboarding facility known as the “God bowl” and an information booth with EFTPOS machines for collecting donations. However, questions must be asked: Who is regulating and evaluating these schools?

Australia’s unfair funding system must continue to be challenged. This is why Federation is campaigning for a funding system that prioritises public schools. As our society becomes more demonstrably unequal and the gulf between rich and poor grows, “the need for religion-free schooling has never been greater, the challenge more daunting, nor the objective more worthy” (Maddox).

If we are to be driven by evidence-based policy and approaches in education, it needs to be applied in all contexts. Federation members can be very proud of our campaigns and ongoing advocacy for equal educational opportunity and fair funding with the latest iteration being the Every School Every Child campaign.

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM BILLS

In 2022, there have been very significant wins for equality, freedom of belief and the professional judgement of teachers. First, after an intense and extremely divisive debate, the federal Morrison Government's controversial Religious Freedom Bill was defeated in Parliament. Then, the NSW Government announced after a lengthy deliberation and a parliamentary inquiry (chaired by Mark Latham) that it would not support One Nation's Parental Rights Bill.

These wins have not come about by accident or without hard work. Equality Australia CEO Anna Brown said:

*"When faced with One Nation's attack on our community, over 12,000 of us wrote to the leaders of NSW political parties, urging them to stand up for trans and gender-diverse young people and inclusive education. Our community was joined by allies like the NSW Teachers Federation, and the Bill was rejected in its entirety."*

Federation also welcomed the decision. President Angelo Gavrielatos said: "A school curriculum cannot be owned by any individual group, political party, regime or tendency."

The proposed Bills in federal and state parliament highlighted the continual encroachment by Conservative politicians and lobby groups on our secular traditions. If these Bills had passed, many anti-discrimination protections for teachers and students could have been overridden. Federation made submissions on all of the Bills including in NSW, where there is still a proposed Religious Freedom and Equality Bill. This Bill, in its present form, appears contrary to the aims and intentions of the Anti-Discrimination Act and will open the door to discriminatory practises that are currently prohibited.

In a positive development, in March 2022 NSW Independent MP Alex Greenwich moved an omnibus Bill that would amend and update NSW's laws to remove all discrimination against the LGBTIQ community. If this Bill is passed a minister for equality position will be created in the NSW Cabinet. This has been described by equality groups as a watershed moment for NSW and necessary to bring us in line with modern anti-discrimination legislation and protections for all people.

## FREEDOM TO DISCRIMINATE

The divisive debate and controversial Bills continue a historical shift in what Australians have been led to believe is the meaning of religious freedom. From the late 1980s through to the late 1990s religious freedom for most people meant increased tolerance for the views of religious minorities. For example, freedom for Muslim women to wear a hijab in the streets without fear of repercussion. Then, from the late 1990s, religious freedom became more about a balancing of rights; whether the rights of religious people should outweigh the rights of the LGBTIQ community. Skip forward to the present where some assert that religious beliefs trump other rights.

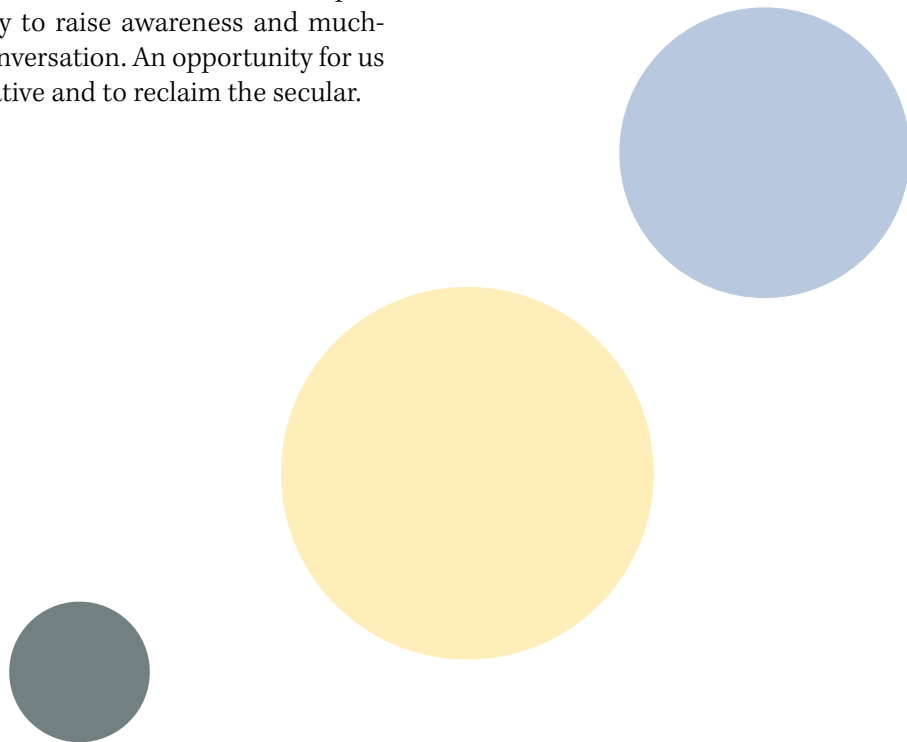
It is this historical shift that explains why the federal Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 came about and why it was defeated. In a deal for the approval of the 2017 plebiscite on marriage equality, the then prime minister Malcom Turnbull promised enhanced legislative religious freedoms to allow discrimination based on religious beliefs. A major broker of this deal was the Australian Christian Lobby. In its submission on the Religious Discrimination Bill the Australian Christian Lobby described its vision as "to see Christian principles and ethics influencing the way we are governed, do business, and relate to each other as a community" (Australian Christian Lobby, 2019). The Bill was shelved because the Australian Christian Lobby withdrew support, believing the changes watered down their right to discriminate.

As dangerous as these Bills are, the obvious overreach may inadvertently be a positive and the start of a much-needed secular awareness campaign. The extensive media coverage and debate highlighted existing discrimination or discriminatory practices in schools, hospitals and aged care. The analysis shone a light on taxation loopholes for religious organisations and the fact that in NSW, religion remains off the list of protected attributes under anti-discrimination legislation.

In my interview with author and social commentator Jane Caro, she outlined that for the Conservatives "the religious freedom Bill was a big own goal, because it drew attention to the extensive freedoms they already have and enabled growing solidarity in the LGBTIQ and feminist community". It also enabled new alliances to be formed with moderates, religious leaders, disability advocates, human rights

organisations and secular organisations with the belief that the Bill would lead to more discrimination in Australia, not less. The consensus being, and to use the government's own words, that any religious discrimination legislation "must be a shield that protects, not a sword that undermines the basic protections of others" (National Secular Lobby, 2022).

Data from the 2021 Census will be released in June 2022. Figures will most likely reveal a further decline in the religiosity of Australians, highlighting that political parties are mistakenly yielding to the powerful and wealthy religious lobby groups rather than the invisible vote. The census data should also provide an opportunity to raise awareness and much-needed national conversation. An opportunity for us to change the narrative and to reclaim the secular.



'Any religious  
discrimination legislation  
must be a shield that  
protects, not a sword that  
undermines the basic  
protections of others'



# RECLAIMING SECULARISM

Nostalgically longing for a secular golden age, and complaining about religious influence, clearly isn't winning any arguments. Secularists need to develop more effective responses. At the start of this research, I was so concerned about the lack of awareness around the term secular, I considered recommending we develop another word. However, I was reassured by the High Court wins over the chaplaincy program, the defeat of the religious discrimination Bills, Victoria's removal of Special Religious Instruction from the school day and the activism of secular grassroots lobby groups throughout Australia. This indicates that secularism still has a place in the Australian consciousness and psyche.

Reclaiming secularism also represents an opportunity to put aside partisan differences, embrace inclusion and achieve success in our broader campaigns.

## STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

We know that for entrenched or structural issues of inequality and social justice, change doesn't just happen nor does it happen quickly. The purpose of this paper is not just to analyse the research but to suggest strategies for change. According to Dr Cathy Byrne, this is important because although there is research documenting the history and issues around desecularisation, there has been little focus on campaigns to rebuild secularism.

Over many years, Federation has successfully shown the power of grassroots movements. Effective organising is crucial, as evidenced in so many of our wins over the past century and Federation's current More than Thanks campaign.

This view is also supported by Senior Lecturer in the University of Newcastle School of Education Nisha Thapliyal, who studies social movements for public education.

Thapliyal said:

*"It's always grassroots community organising that is the key to changing historically exclusionary cultures and institutions, but this kind of activism takes more time than, for example, protest actions or even lobbying."*

She advised that history teaches us that resilient movements and campaigns figure out not only how to bring diverse people together but also to keep them together in collective struggle.

Coalition-building will be integral to the work of rebuilding secularism in Australian education, requiring ongoing dialogue about shared values and understandings of the issues within the coalition, with ample room for dissent and disagreement. Respect for the diversity that constitutes Australian society also translates into the messaging and other campaign tactics.

Social movement research shows that awareness raising isn't enough to achieve profound cultural change on issues related to religion, gender, race and ethnicity. Instead, there needs to be an education campaign. Raising awareness about a social problem can be the beginning of an activist education project. However, it's important not to just make people aware of what's happening, but to provide the tools required for critical analysis of the problem: why it is happening and why it matters to the people directly involved and society as a whole.

To commence our campaign, we need to begin with parents, students and teachers, and school communities. To reach this target audience, the media can be important, but we must remember who controls the media in Australia and whether it matters in relation to this issue. My experience with using the media on this matter is that the mainstream media

have been keen to cover the topic. The difficulty has been that we haven't had a campaign plan to channel this interest. A comprehensive public relations and media strategy, including social media specific to this campaign and reflecting shared values, is a key recommendation (number 8) of this report.

Successful campaigns produce their own media and create their own narrative. Thapliyal's research on how education activists use media around the world indicates that social media has a key role to play, however, there has also been an over-reliance on Twitter in campaigns related to public education. While politicians and the media undoubtedly follow and engage in policy debates on Twitter, that's not where the stakeholders are. Parents, students and teachers are on other digital networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

Thapliyal acknowledges that many education advocacy groups and organisations on the political left don't have the resources to manage multiple media platforms. Pro-market education activists do. That's why a coalition of the key groups is important and has proven to be successful in other campaigns in countries such as Aotearoa/New Zealand, Brazil, Chile and the US. The Coalition can target the relevant messages to the particular groups.

Educational consultant and project officer to address gender dimensions and disadvantage Maria Delaney said that because the topic is so emotional, people can easily be hooked into triggers before they get the right information. She suggested framing the issues in the positive, for example, beginning with what sort of schools and society do we want? What sort of people are we learning from? What are their values? This allows the target audience to develop their own critique.

Jane Caro recommended a secular conference as a starting point. She said that NSW, and Federation in particular, was leading the way in the Australian union movement and what better way to start the conversation than a conference at Teachers Federation House. She used Ireland as an example of the possibilities of change. "If you'd said 10 years ago that Ireland would legalise gay marriage and legalise abortion, and make it free, I'd have said you were dreaming. But they have. So never say never. If they can do it, we can do it with our campaigns."

Caro suggested framing the effects that the inter-connection of Special Religious Education (SRE), chaplaincy and programs such as *Shine* have on students and our society, using anecdotes and personal stories. She said it wouldn't be easy; the political left was always hard on itself because it can't solve all the world's problems, mainly because the right has all the money, but in the end the arguments become so overwhelming that progressives win.

Caro said:

*"There will still be misery in the world and injustice, no matter how well you do, but nevertheless, if you make it a little less miserable and a little less unjust, you're doing good work."*

## FRAMING THE DEBATE

In the same way as it is important to tackle the ideology and not the person in politics, framing is also crucial. George Lakoff's book *Don't think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate* (2004) outlines that it is not an accident that Conservatives are winning many political debates. Lakoff explains that the Conservatives understand the importance of getting their values and ideas in the public consciousness by framing the debate in their terms and using their language.

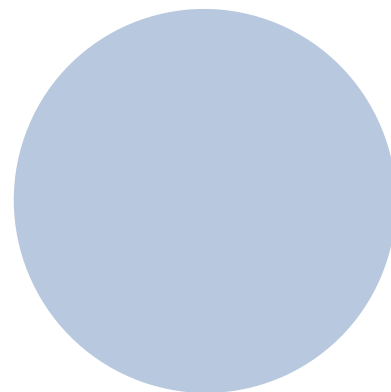
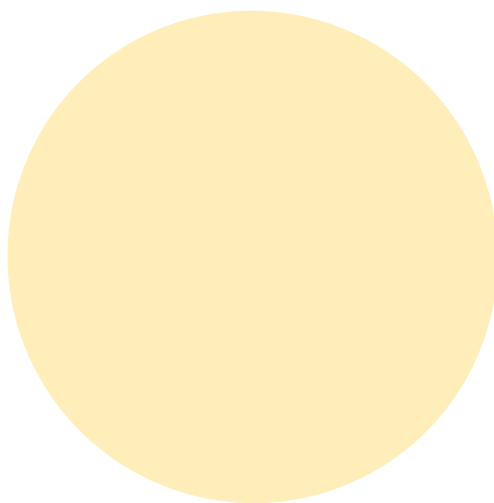
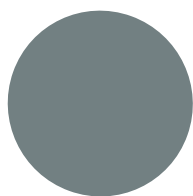
We need to change the narrative. Learning about religion in schools is acceptable as part of the curriculum, but unregulated religious instruction needs to occur outside school hours. In a broader sense, if we can achieve an understanding that secularism protects all faiths and is a framework for ensuring equality, then what is anti-secular? There are shared values and an understanding that inclusion is good for our society and that extremism is not.

Reframing this debate won't be easy. The Conservatives have framed the term secular as anti-religious. Private SRE providers are heavily invested as well, for a whole host of reasons including financial. Strategies to achieve change require sophisticated and detailed engagement, education and an action plan to overcome the challenges posed by the highly coordinated and connected religious lobby. (See recommendations.)

In coordinating this plan, Senior Officers and Executive will have to contend with these lobby groups

portraying us as anti-religious, which may lead to some of our members and school communities condemning the campaign. Fear of backlash has left many politicians and members of the general public scared to come out and say what they believe. In my opinion, we can no longer afford to be silent and we can learn from the myriad of highly successful LGBTIQ community campaigns to be 'loud and proud' of our secular beliefs as set out in our policy.

The groundswell of public opinion against SRE, government-funded chaplaincy and religious schools needs to become a people-power movement. This includes activating parents, students and members of our communities who are sympathetic to create our own narrative. As always, grassroots community organising is the key to success as is framing the debate in our terms. For as Australia becomes more polarised and divided on political and religious lines, embracing the secular has never been so important.





# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the early 19th century, Australians did something very special. We put aside our sectarian division, came together and created the world's first legislated secular education system. At that time, we abolished state aid to religious schools and cemented the NSW public education system as one of the best in the world. We did this by embracing the secular.

Australia, once leading the world in secular education and academic results, is now falling behind on the international stage. It is no coincidence that this has occurred in the time of a sustained period of desecularisation. Record funding to chaplains and religious schools has not occurred by accident; a small but organised religious lobby has influenced our public life, institutions and policy. Fundamentalist religious groups in Australia are growing, they have an agenda and have taken an interest in public education.

It is time that we, as a nation and as a union, shed the taboo topic tag and take an informed, respectful interest in religion in schools too.

In this context, even the antiquated 'Scripture'/Special Religious Education (SRE) has changed. It is no longer what parents may remember as poor-quality but relatively harmless; in my interviews academics warned some lessons are now promoting extremism. Subsequently, our strategies and focus need to change.

A precedent has been created in Victoria, and at a strategy level we would do well to frame the campaign around time. In the classroom and modern society, time is crucial. Workloads are excessive and

the curriculum is crowded. SRE is a massive waste of valuable learning time. It is also outdated, devalues the profession and is considered by academia as the exact opposite of what is appropriate and required. Our students and society need education not indoctrination, teachers not preachers.

Australia can lead the world again in secular education and learning outcomes. This does not mean we need to halt teaching of general religious education, values and world views. Reclaiming the secular represents an opportunity on all sides of politics to unite and embrace inclusion. It represents an opportunity to create a society in which people of all religions, and none, can live together fairly and peacefully.

Imagine a country where all religions are treated equally with the freedom to practise without fear of discrimination. A country where education is free of vested interests and teachers are treated and respected as the professionals that we are.

Imagine a state:

- that doesn't compromise on secular legislation where schools have the appropriate time and resources to meet all students' needs
- where school children are taught about world religions by a qualified teacher as part of an inclusive, authorised curriculum
- where the educational focus is on student outcomes and creating a vibrant, cohesive society.

This can easily be us again. The time to reclaim the secular is now. To quote our President at the start of the More Than Thanks campaign: "If not now, when?" It's time that we, as a union, took the secular lead in NSW.

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

### SECULAR AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

**1.** Federation should initiate a broad awareness campaign targeted at our members and the wider community. This would be a medium- to long-term campaign launched by a secular conference and hosted at Teachers Federation House by the Centre for Public Education Research (CPER). The aim of the conference would be to raise awareness, build key alliances, highlight key campaigns and begin the secular narrative. This would be followed up with journal articles, publicity, media and ongoing Federation discussion and policy development to strengthen and deepen the understanding of this important topic.

### BUILDING ALLIANCES

**2.** It's time that we, as a part of the Australian Education Union, commenced a national campaign and approach. The secular conference is a great first step. This awareness needs to be embraced and enhanced at the national level.

Federation should formally move at an upcoming Australian Education Union Federal Conference that the Australian Education Union develop a policy position paper and detailed campaign strategy regarding religious education in public schools and making our public schools secular.

A core campaign focus would be to reinvigorate a national campaign opposing the school chaplaincy program. The ACT and Victoria have been able to make important changes and, as outlined in this report, all states and territories are facing similar challenges with respect to religious instruction, chaplaincy and school funding. Each state also has grassroots organisations fighting similar battles. A national campaign with a focus on school chaplaincy represents an opportunity to bring them together and build key alliances.

A national focus also represents a great opportunity to share ideas and strategies, not just on this topic but in general. Travelling to other states and speaking with union leaders made me realise that as a union movement we need more regular contact and dialogue with our state comrades, especially at the organiser level.

Desecularisation can't be seen in isolation from our

other campaigns at a state or national level, particularly regarding school funding. This is union business, and perhaps most appropriately coordinated at a national, Australian Education Union level.

### OPPOSING THE CHAPLAINCY PROGRAM

**3.** Federation should support a reinvigorated national Australian Education Union campaign to remove the chaplaincy program. This would involve actively participating in any national strategy. Possible strategies include discrediting the program and wedging the government. The \$61.4 million per year spent on a program that the High Court ruled has no benefit to students could instead be spent on an identified target group. I would suggest qualified professionals providing learning support, early intervention and/or more school counsellors.

At a state level, Federation should continue to highlight the flawed chaplaincy program and the importance of school counsellors, especially considering the effect of the pandemic and natural disasters on our children. The call for more school counsellors is one of the key claims of the More Than Thanks campaign.

Federation should work with key stakeholders to advocate for changes to the NSW School Chaplaincy Agreement. These agreements may present legal loopholes for the contract to be modified or rescinded. Federation's Industrial team should analyse the upcoming NSW agreement and possible independent review.

### RELIGIOUS FREEDOM — PROTECTING ALL OUR MEMBERS

**4.** The failure of the federal Religious Discrimination Bill and One Nation's Parental Rights Bill is a significant win, for now. It is testament to campaigning by Federation and a broad community alliance. The union and its membership should be congratulated for its advocacy, but we need to remember that there is still NSW legislation before Parliament. Federation will have to be diligent with this matter and continue to raise awareness and make further submissions where necessary to protect all our members from this ongoing conservative and discriminatory agenda.

Federation should consider where and when it is appropriate to advocate for 'religious belief or non-belief' to be added as a protected attribute in the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act. We should continue to support progressive legislation and positive rights such as Independent MP

Alex Greenwich's Omnibus Bill that, if passed, would further protect our LGBTIQ members and create a Minister for Equality position in the NSW Cabinet. Any legislation must be a shield to protect not a sword to discriminate.

## DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION – REGULATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

5. As this report has shown, the potential for students to be exposed to extremist material, activities and ideas both inside and outside the school gates is alarming. This is occurring not just in SRE classes and via chaplains in the playground but through organised programs such as *Hard Core Christians*, which can be run as part of SRE or other activities of a religious nature in schools. These programs are not being regulated appropriately by the Department.

Of equal concern is the more subtle gendered material aimed at young students such as Hillsong's *Shine* and *Strength* programs, which promote narrow gender stereotypes and what many consider to be controversial and anti-feminist messages. These programs embed stereotypes and values of a religious nature, both overtly and covertly. The Department must regulate these programs and make it clear to parents which organisations these programs come from.

Federation, with participation from our Women's Committee, should consider revisiting and developing specific policy around programs targeting narrow gender stereotypes in schools.

Programs targeting students who identify as male, female or gender non-binary must be aligned to the current NSW syllabus curriculum outcomes and must be vetted by the Department. The regulations around these programs and the approval process for SRE providers needs to be overhauled. This is the Department's job and responsibility. Federation should consider pursuing the Department for maladministration.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS: REMOVAL OF SPECIAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION/SPECIAL EDUCATION IN ETHICS

Federation Senior Officers and Executive should develop a comprehensive strategy and action plan to remove SRE from classroom teaching time and, ultimately, the Education Act. This action, as per

Federation policy and its Council decision of November 2018, will most likely involve a medium- to long-term centralised campaign with crucial short-term strategies and goals. Ultimately, the legislation needs to be removed. The wording of the Act is prescriptive and problematic and without change, schools will continue to be at the whim of departmental interpretation and electoral cycles.

In the present political climate, the best chance to achieve our long-term objective of removing the legislation is through a series of short-term changes. As part of developing this campaign action plan Federation should consider that:

- the opt-in enrolment process needs to remain. At present there is significant pushback from SRE providers and the Department for the new online enrolment form to return to an opt-out process
- the Department needs to appropriately monitor and regulate the providers and the system. (In Victoria, it was policy changes made by the Department under a Conservative government that led to participation numbers falling about 80 per cent. Due diligence and simple accountability measures are both appropriate and expected in all other school activities.)
- Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics should take place in schools at lunch/recess or before/after school. A time directly after school lessons have finished is the preference of the key stakeholders.

Providers and any other religious or community groups can apply to use public schools, outside of curriculum time, as part of the Department's Sharing of School Facilities policy (NSW Department of Education, 2021). Clarification from New Law around the legislation indicates that lunch/recess is legally the most robust position. The option of having Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics after lessons have finished/still in the school day is also deemed appropriate but more open to Departmental policy interpretation. The legislation and Department policy note that the time allocated for Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics is an agreement between the principal and the provider and as such, it may require a school to take action to create a precedent. More detailed legal

clarifications from New Law have been provided for this report and are available for information. Federation should consider engaging further expert legislative advice on this matter where required.

## SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

**6. Federation to liaise** with the Primary Principals' Association, Secondary Principals' Council, NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations and other key stakeholders to develop a joint position regarding how changes to, or the removal of, Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics can be best accommodated in our school system.

*This has already been actioned as part of this Eric Pearson Study Grant. As outlined, there is now a general consensus and unified position among the key educational stakeholders.*

**7. Communique:** Federation should intensify its campaign with the Primary Principals' Association, Secondary Principals' Council, NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations and other groups as appropriate, to formalise this position and issue a joint statement calling on Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics to be conducted outside curriculum time. Federation should use this statement as Executive and Senior Officers deem appropriate, with the aim being to discredit Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics and wedge the Government and Department by highlighting how many other important programs or release time could be provided during this time.

**8. Federation to consider designing a logo, slogan and media and public relations strategy.** This could be developed by our Communications team or by engaging a public relations company. As outlined, careful framing is key and possible launch dates may be Annual Conference, census results (June) or at the proposed secular conference (possibly the start of 2023). This launch would be supported by a series of media releases.

**9. Parent and members survey:** Federation to engage a company to conduct a series of quantitative and qualitative parent and member surveys. These would be similar to the Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools survey with the data extrapolated and used when and where appropriate.

*A parental survey has already been actioned as part of this Eric Pearson Study Grant and the More Than Thanks campaign. The results are being correlated.*

**10. Motions:** Federation to consider developing both Association and school workplace motions as part of the broader campaign.

**Every Association** could be provided with a motion to endorse that contains detailed but time-efficient campaign action points. Federation Executive and Senior Officers should determine appropriate key action points and timing.

**Federation Workplace Committees:** After liaising with the local Organiser, members should be encouraged to endorse a school motion for Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics to occur outside curriculum time, but still meet the legislative requirements. One example would be in the afternoon when lessons have finished. Many high schools have already adopted this model and could be used as an example.

*As part of this research paper a draft Workplace Committee motion has been developed for approval.*

**11. Federation's Department strategy:** Continue to expose and pursue the Department over its failure to adequately regulate and monitor their own policy and procedures. Continue to advocate for policy changes especially regarding authorisations, enticements and child protection. If deemed necessary, consider referring the Department to the ombudsman and other channels for maladministration on these fronts.

## MEDIUM-TERM STRATEGIES

**12. Activate the membership:** Federation should consider placing this campaign item on the next Principals' Conference agenda, with the union to co-present with the representatives from the Primary Principals' Association and Secondary Principals' Council. The union should publish articles updating the membership on the campaign and possible action members can take.

**13. Work with parents and the community:** Federation should continue to liaise with community groups and consider developing a **communications strategy** with a designated campaign link on our website. This should include suggested actions and/or links to other organisations. Action items may include pro-forma letters, a petition or call for

both a parliamentary review and an independent review into Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics. Federation should work with Fairness in Religion in Schools and the NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations to develop an easy-to-read fact sheet. This would be disseminated to Federation Representatives and P&C branches as well as being made available online.

Numerous academics and union officials have highlighted the importance and value of students being involved in campaigns that directly affect them. This is definitely the case with Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics and as the previous Eric Pearson report, *Whose world? Our World! The #climatestrike movement and the future of unionism*, highlighted, students are proving to be incredible activists. These processes could be developed through school student representative bodies and other appropriate means.

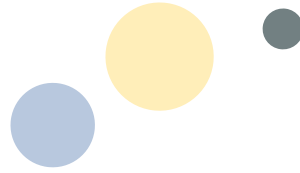
**14. Strengthen and broaden alliances:** Many pro-secular alliances have been developed through this research project. Organisations such as the National Secular Lobby and Rationalist Society of Australia are keen to promote our campaign once fully developed. Many other organisations could also support and easily adopt a policy position that would assist in building community awareness. For example, the NSW Council for Civil Liberties has a formal policy position calling for the removal of SRE.

**15. Political strategy:** Federation to continue to meet with all sides of politics on this matter. Moving Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics outside curriculum time is much less controversial and more likely to gain approval than complete removal, especially with Labor. The Greens and some state Labor MPs have indicated that they would be happy to move a Private Member's Bill and potentially trigger an Upper House inquiry. Federation Executive and Senior Officers should develop a detailed political plan as part of the campaign.

## LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

**16. Federation Executive and Senior Officers should develop a long-term strategy to remove Special Religious Education/Special Education in Ethics from the 1990 Education Act:** This antiquated policy simply must be replaced as the wording is highly problematic and is the most prescriptive in the country.

A key component in the removal of the legislation is achieving the mid- to short-term targets. This will build momentum with the aim of developing a groundswell of public opinion against what is, at best, a waste of valuable learning time and, at worst, a deliberate and dangerous attack on our secular traditions.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge my union for giving me the opportunity to author this report. I don't take for granted the privilege of being able to live out my politics and all the support provided to me over the past year. This includes, but is not limited to, President Angelo Gavrielatos and the Senior Officer team, and former Federation Senior Officers and previous Eric Pearson authors Denis Fitzgerald and Joan Lemaire for reviewing my work. Special thanks to Joan who spent hours working with me to refine my early draft. Solicitor Tim Roberts and the New Law team. Our library team, especially Graeme Smart, the superhero librarian. Mel Smith, Jason Gerke, Margaret Gordon and the Communications team, and the awesome Aidee Milne, administration support in the Newcastle office.

I would also like to thank and acknowledge all the activists that I interviewed and who have been advocating for change on this issue for many years. In particular, Dr Darrin Morgan, whose commitment and passion for secular education is second to none.

You are all inspirational, as are the academics that I interviewed who are toiling away in this important

and undervalued field. The old saying "standing on the shoulders of giants" is very apt, and I do need to make mention in this respect to Marion Maddox and Cathy Byrne.

Special thanks to Dr Matt Lumb (Associate Director, Centre of Excellence in Equity University of Newcastle) and one of my best mates. Your assistance and expert advice, especially on a Sunday afternoon over a game of tennis and ale has been extremely valuable and enjoyable. I have a new-found respect for research projects and the important work that you do in the equity field.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family for putting up with me and supporting me while I completed this year-long study. To my dear Lisa, I hope this report means you can continue to do the thing you love: teaching without interruption every week. To my children, Rosie and Leo, and all the other kids across the state who sit idle in the library, segregated on religious lines, just like I did nearly 40 years ago, I hope this report signals the end for SRE, and the beginning of a lifelong love of learning about history, philosophy, values and religion.



# REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

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# APPENDIX: INTERVIEWEES

The formal interviews of key players in this field have been crucial in gaining data and the methodology for this report. Interviewees were chosen because they are widely regarded as the leaders in their field of academia and advocacy, in particular, the intersection of religion, politics and education. Interviews occurred both in person and via Zoom in four different states and territories. There were numerous other less formal interviews, meetings and discussions with students, teachers, politicians, community members and education bureaucrats. Current and past politicians on all sides of politics were interviewed, but preferred not to make comment for this report, highlighting the empirical data showing that religion is still considered a taboo topic. Interviewees include, but are not limited to:

## ACADEMICS

- **Dr Cathy Byrne:** Renowned author and academic in the field of religion and education
- **Anna Halafoff:** Associate Professor, Deakin University. Sociologist, author and Research Associate of the UNESCO Chair in Interreligious and Intercultural Relations — Asia Pacific at Monash University
- **Professor Marion Maddox:** Honorary Professor of Politics, academic, religious education author. Widely considered to be the leading authority in the intersection of religion, politics and education
- **Professor Graham Oppy:** Author, Professor of Philosophy specialising in Religion, Monash University. CEO of the Australasian Association of Philosophy
- **Nisha Thapliyal:** Senior Lecturer Education, University of Newcastle, and researcher on social movements for public education. Previously, Director International for the School of Education (SOE)

## SOCIAL COMMENTATORS

- **Jane Caro AM:** Walkley Award-winning Australian columnist, author, novelist, broadcaster, documentary maker, feminist, and social commentator. 2022 Senate candidate for the Reason Party and National Secular Lobby Ambassador
- **Maria Delaney:** Education consultant and project officer to address gender dimensions and disadvantage including leading roles in the prevention of violence against women, and respectful relationships education in Queensland and Victoria

## LEGAL EXPERTS

- **Dr Luke Beck:** Associate Professor, Associate Dean Education. Author and expert in the field of constitutional law
- **Julian Burnside AO, QC:** Barrister, Author, Human rights and refugee advocate, National Secular Lobby ambassador
- **The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG:** Former Justice of the High Court of Australia; Deputy President of the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission; Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission; Judge of the Federal Court of Australia; President of the New South Wales Court of Appeal; President of the Court of Appeal of Solomon Islands
- **Timothy Roberts:** Solicitor, New Law

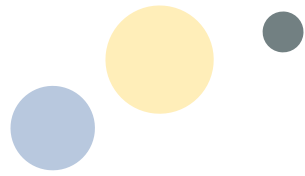
## ACTIVISTS AND LOBBY GROUPS

- **Trevor Bell:** Solicitor, Noosa Temple of Satan
- **Anna Brown OAM:** CEO Equality Australia
- **Alison Courtice:** Lawyer and spokesperson for Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools
- **Dr Meredith Doig OAM, FAICD:** President of the Rationalist Society

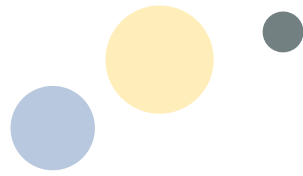
- **Craig McPherson:** Co-director operations manager, Fairness in Religion in Schools
- **Julia Mizuno:** Co-founder and spokesperson, Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools
- **Peter Monk:** President, National Secular Lobby
- **Dr Darrin Morgan:** Co-director and operations manager, Fairness in Religion in Schools
- **Ron Williams:** Secular activist and campaigner most famous for two successful High Court challenges regarding the National School Chaplaincy Program. 2022 Senate candidate for the Reason Party.

## EDUCATION AND UNION OFFICIALS

- **Kris Arcaro:** Victorian Department of Education
- **Denis Fitzgerald:** Former Federation president
- **Amber Flohm:** Federation Senior Vice President
- **Angelo Gavrielatos:** Federation President
- **Caitlin Greenwell:** Victorian Department of Education
- **Correna Haythorpe:** Australian Education Union (AEU) President
- **Joan Lemaire:** Former Federation Deputy President
- **Briley Stokes:** Australian Education Union (Victoria) Vice President, Primary
- **Natalie Walker:** NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations (P&C) President
- **Craig Wood:** Queensland Teachers' Union Assistant Secretary — Research Officer.



# NOTES



# NOTES



