

Religious Education Implementation Procedures

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Definitions

Special religious education is education in the beliefs and practices of an approved religious persuasion by authorised representatives of that persuasion.

General religious education is education about the world's major religions, what people believe and how that belief affects their lives. It is taught mainly through the school curriculum.

Special education in ethics is education in ethical decision making, action and reflection within a secular framework, based on a branch of philosophy.

Special religious education

Background

Section 32 of the *Education Act 1990* requires that 'in every government school, time is to be allowed for the religious education of children of any religious persuasion'.

The procedures for special religious education in public schools consider:

- recommendations 36-72 of the report, *Religion in Education in NSW Government Schools (1980)*, which were adopted by the government of the day as the basis of an agreement with the churches about the implementation of special religious education
- *Education Act 1990* Section 33A, an amendment approved in 2010 to allow the option of special education in ethics for parents/caregivers who do not wish their children to attend special religious education
- the recommendations of the *Final Report from the Inquiry into Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011* that were published in June 2012.

The provision of special religious education is not government funded.

Parent/caregiver rights

The right to religious education

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

The right of choice

Parents/caregivers may nominate an alternative persuasion, where special religious education cannot be offered for students of a particular religious persuasion, or for other reasons.

Parents/caregivers also have the right to choose not to have their children attend special religious education.

The right to information

Parents/caregivers have the right to know how special religious education will be organised each year and which religious organisations will deliver it.

Parents/caregivers who choose for their children not to attend special religious education also have the right to know what options are available including special education in ethics.

Responsibilities for special religious education

Responsibilities of schools

Provision of special religious education

Principals allow time for special religious education where authorised representatives of approved providers are available.

Special religious education is an integral part of school activities, taking place in school hours and under the jurisdiction of the school.

Principals support special religious education by ensuring that no academic instruction or formal school activities occur during time set aside for special religious education. Such activities create conflict of choice for some parents and students attending special religious education.

Teaching special religious education

Special religious education is delivered by religious persuasions that have the approval of the Minister for Education for that purpose. A list of approved providers is available at

<http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/religion/index.htm>.

Only persons authorised by approved religious persuasions teach special religious education.

While on duty, members of a school's staff do not teach special religious education.

Timing of special religious education

Special religious education is organised by negotiation and agreement between the principal and the approved religious providers. Principals are sensitive to the voluntary nature of special religious education and are aware that many special religious education teachers have commitments in more than one school.

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

A flexible time schedule may be used, if the principal and the approved religious providers are in agreement and provided that the time allocated does not exceed an average of one hour per school week. Arrangements are reviewed regularly by the principal.

Information for parents/caregivers

Parents/caregivers are advised how special religious education classes are organised including the religious persuasions that will be providing special religious education for particular classes or year groups.

This advice also includes options if parents/caregivers do not wish their children to attend special religious education, including special education in ethics where it is available.

This information is provided through enrolment information, the school website and the school newsletter.

Enrolment in special religious education

At enrolment, parents/caregivers are to be advised:

- of special religious education options at the school, including the religious persuasions providing special religious education and arrangements made for students whose parents/caregivers indicate that they are not to attend special religious education
- that they may nominate an alternative persuasion, where special religious education is not offered for students of a particular religious persuasion, or for other reasons.

Where a religious persuasion was nominated on enrolment, the student is enrolled in a special religious education class of the religious persuasion identified on the student's enrolment record.

Where a religious persuasion was not nominated, the student is placed in alternative activities.

When a particular religious persuasion is not available, parents/caregivers are informed of options including other special religious education and alternative activities.

A parent/caregiver may at any time notify the school in writing that they do not wish their child to attend special religious education.

Students are to continue in the same arrangement as the previous year, unless a parent/caregiver has requested a change.

Students not attending special religious education

In the times set aside for special religious education, students not attending are located in a separate physical space from special religious education classes.

Schools provide meaningful activities with appropriate care and supervision. These activities neither compete with special religious education nor are they lessons in the curriculum. Suitable activities include reading, private study and completing homework.

Special education in ethics is an option for students not attending special religious education, where it is practicable and requested by the parents/caregivers.

When insufficient teachers or accommodation are available, the school's policy on minimal supervision operates.

Communication

It is the responsibility of the school to ensure parents/caregivers and the wider community are aware of special religious education and alternative activities offered at the school.

Any changes to special religious education, alternative activities or special education in ethics options should be communicated to the school community.

Early during Term 4, special religious education coordinators from religious persuasions are informed of estimated numbers for special religious education classes for the following year to assist in recruiting teachers.

Special religious education teachers are also informed if there are any changes to timetabling that will affect special religious education classes.

Information about students

Student information is confidential and teachers of special religious education are only to be given:

- the names of the students in their class
- any special information, such as disability or special needs, which might affect the health, behaviour or performance of particular students.

Information about lesson content

The principal is not responsible for, and does not disseminate details of, lesson content for special religious education, but will provide the name and contact details of the approved provider or their local representative.

Student behaviour management

Principals and teachers retain duty of care for students and intervene in cases where it is necessary to maintain good order and conduct.

The principal pursues such cases with the representative of the approved provider.

Class teachers are not required to attend classes in special religious education, but may, with the agreement of the teacher of special religious education or at the request of the principal, assist with behaviour management or remain in the classroom.

Complaints

Principals who have received complaints concerning alleged teaching inefficiency or inappropriate lesson content take appropriate steps and notify the representative of the approved provider that authorised the teacher.

If a principal receives allegations of improper behaviour or other complaints of a serious nature it is managed in accordance with the Department's policies and procedures. The principal must refer allegations of a child protection nature to the Department's Employee Performance and Conduct Directorate.

School special religious education coordinator

Where appropriate, a member of staff is appointed as the school's special religious education coordinator. Duties of the coordinator include:

- arranging meetings early in Term 4 between the school and representatives of the approved religious providers to organise special religious education organisation for the following year
- liaising with special religious education teachers to:
 - familiarise them with the procedures and operations of the school, especially at the beginning of the year
 - advise them of any variations of school routine affecting special religious education
- maintaining special religious education records, including:
 - an up-to-date list of the authorised special religious education teachers from the approved religious providers
 - a list of the names of students in each class for special religious education teachers .
- advising parents/caregivers of arrangements for special religious education classes for the next year and ongoing information about any changes as they occur.

Responsibilities of providers

Approval to deliver special religious education

Religious persuasions must have the approval of the Minister for Education to deliver special religious education.

Persuasions wishing to obtain approval should contact the Executive Officer of the NSW Department of Education and Communities Consultative Committee for Special Religious Education at srecontacts@det.nsw.edu.au.

Authorisation to teach special religious education

The authorisation of personnel to teach special religious education is the sole responsibility of each individual approved provider.

An approved provider is not to authorise any person as a special religious education teacher who has not signed a prohibited employment declaration or who has a criminal conviction for one or more of the following:

- a crime against a minor
- violence
- sexual assault
- the provision of prohibited drugs.

Any minister, priest, rabbi, mufti, other like religious leader or spiritual official of a religion or paid employee providing special religious education must undergo a

Working with Children Check.

Volunteers providing special religious education in NSW public schools must complete a declaration that they are not a person prohibited from undertaking child-related employment. This includes anyone under the age of 18 who may volunteer to teach special religious education.

Every approved religious provider must provide annually to the Department, a written assurance that they have procedures in place to ensure compliance with the requirements of the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998*. These assurances are to be sent to:

The Executive Officer
NSW Department of Education and Communities Consultative Committee on
Special Religious Education
1 Oxford Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Recruitment, training and support

It is the responsibility of each approved provider to provide sufficient special religious education teachers.

It is the responsibility of an approved provider to recruit, train and authorise teachers of special religious education.

The provider must ensure that the school is informed of the names and contact details of its local representatives and authorised teachers.

The provider must ensure that all special religious education teachers are provided with a name badge to be worn at all times when on a school site.

The representative of a special religious education provider should inform the principal when there are insufficient authorised teachers available.

Lesson content

It is the responsibility of an approved provider to:

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

General religious education

Conscientious objection on religious grounds to part of a course of study

The *Education Act 1990* Section 26 allows an exemption for students from attending classes at the request of parents/caregivers who conscientiously object on religious grounds to a particular part of a course of study.

Principals are responsible for responding sensitively to the beliefs of parents/caregivers and their children and for taking all steps to minimise feelings of discomfort or embarrassment on the part of students. This will be aided by the publication of a clear statement of school policy and procedures for the benefit of staff and parents/caregivers and should contain a statement about:

- the right of parents/caregivers under the Act to take this action
- the responsibility of the school to provide information about courses if requested
- appropriate supervision or alternative studies
- advice to parents/caregivers about any implication for the award of the Record of School Achievement or Higher School Certificate
- the school's certificate of exemption (Illustration 1)
- keeping a record of the written request by parents/caregivers and the certificate of exemption
- provision of a copy of the school's certificate of exemption to the student.

Example:

Certificate of exemption	
Name of school: _____	
Student's name: _____	
First name	Surname
Class/Year _____	
Under the provisions of Section 26 of the <i>Education Act 1990</i> , the above named student is exempt, on the basis of conscientious objection on religious grounds, from the following classes or lessons:	

Principal's signature	Date

Illustration 1.

Curriculum-related programs with a religious base

When considering the use of external curriculum-related programs that have been developed by a religious persuasion, principals should ensure that these programs do not implicitly or explicitly promote that persuasion. Programs that promote a particular religious persuasion should be considered special religious education and are unsuitable for instruction outside the provisions for special religious education.

Chaplains

School Chaplaincy does not fall within the religious education policy. For more information on the Commonwealth *National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program* please refer to:

<http://deewr.gov.au/national-school-chaplaincy-and-student-welfare-program>

Voluntary student activities of a religious nature in schools

Voluntary religious activities and prayer groups are not part of special religious education, but may operate under the auspices and supervision of the principal. Scripture Union (NSW) coordinates Interschool Christian Fellowship (ISCF) groups in secondary schools and Scripture Union Primary Age (SUPA) groups in primary schools.

School prayers

Schools are permitted to use or to write school prayers. These prayers are to be interdenominational Christian or multi-faith to reflect the diversity of the school community.

Consultation with the school community should occur about both the prayer and the types of occasions on which it will be used.

The Education Act 1990, section 33 states parents/caregivers can object to any general religious education. Children of parents/caregivers who have indicated this objection, including their children being present when prayers are said, should be supervised in another area of the school.

Commemorations, religious observances and multi-faith services in schools

Schools may wish to hold an event that contains religious elements such as school commemorations, religious observances and multi-faith services.

These events are the product of consultation with the school community and parents/caregivers are notified of the nature of the service and reminded of their right to object to the inclusion of their children. Schools provide alternative activities in another area of the school for students who do not participate.

Providers of special religious education may be invited to participate in particular commemorations and observances.

School commemorations

These include events such as Education Week, Anzac Day, Remembrance Day and school centenaries.

Education Week

Whether a school holds an Education Week service or not is a decision made by the school principal.

Where there are students not permitted by their parents/caregivers to participate in this service, the school could arrange alternative services in conjunction with the appropriate religious leaders, or continue special education in ethics classes, where applicable.

Religious observances

These can be conducted as part of general religious education and include religious observances from a range of faith groups.

Multi-faith services

When schools consider a multi-faith service, religious groups and individuals should not be pressured to compromise their faith for the sake of holding the service.

Where there is a desire to bring together people of different religions and a multi-faith service is considered appropriate, the following principles should apply:

- All religious leaders in the local community should be invited to participate from commencement of preparation of the service.
- A local committee set up to develop the service should have adequate representation from all relevant religious groups.
- A 'Multi-Faith Order of Service' should be used as the word 'worship' may create barriers to participation on such occasions. Individual religious groups are not expected to compromise their beliefs for the sake of holding such a service.

Appendix A: Patterns of special religious education organisation

A range of patterns is used to organise special religious education in schools. Care is taken not to adopt any form of organisation which could be of more benefit to some providers than to others.

Any pattern of providing special religious education must be equivalent to at least 30 minutes per week and no more than one hour per week.

Class groups

In many schools class-based organisation will support special religious education because it features regular contact, planned and systematic teaching. Time assigned for these weekly classes will reflect the age and attention span of students and will be no less than 30 minutes.

Combined arrangements

Religious persuasions may decide to provide a combined arrangement. If this occurs, all religious persuasions authorise the persons who teach, and authorise the curriculum content. No religious persuasion is compelled to participate in this form of organisation. A combined arrangement is reviewed often by the school and the religious persuasions. In a combined arrangement only those students who have nominated one of the participating religious persuasions on their enrolment form should be involved.

Excursions or visits

Any activities offered over and above the allocated time for special religious education are extra-curricular activities and are to be treated as such.

During time allocated for special religious education

The principal will take into account the time provision for special religious education of the nominating provider and the capacity of the personnel to carry out that activity within the principal's duty of care. External to time allocated for special religious education

Principals ensure parents/caregivers are clear that these activities are not school activities. Schools have no involvement in such activities.

Note that if a parent/caregiver decides to send their child to an event planned by an outside organisation, which is not supported by the school principal, the absence would be recorded as unjustified as explained under the Student Attendance in Government Schools – Procedures.