

Policy awareness campaign update: August/September

Misinformation continues about restrictions placed on children who are opted out of SRE

Specifically, the misinformation centres on what activities can be undertaken by children not enrolled in scripture while scripture classes take place. Errors made relate to both the legislation and Department of Education (DoE) policy, and are made and disseminated in the procedures and supporting materials provided by DoE to schools and available on the DoE website.

Legislation: The first misinformation relates to the legislation – specifically the NSW Education Act 1990 (No. 8). Often activists or commentators make the mistake of stating the prohibition on students attending non-scripture undertaking meaningful activities is enshrined *in law*. In fact, the law (Sections 32, 33, and 33A of the Act) does not restrict any learning or activities while other students attend scripture classes. Those restrictions are instead applied through the Department of Education’s policies.

Policy: The second misinformation relates to the Religious Education Policy. The current policy *does not* restrict ethics classes taking place during periods when scripture is taught. Nor does it seek to restrict what children not participating in scripture are to be allowed to do. In 2010 DoE removed a discriminatory paragraph that declared children who were not in SRE were only able to engage in activities that:

should neither compete with SRE nor be alternative lessons in the subjects within the curriculum or other areas, such as, ethics, values, civics or general religious education.

This was replaced with this paragraph:

Schools are to provide meaningful activities for students whose parents have withdrawn them from special religious education. Where it is reasonably practicable and requested by a parent/caregiver, this may include the option of special education in ethics.

(View [current policy here](#)).

This misinformation is cited as the main argument to remove SRE/SEE, and it continues to discriminate against children who are currently in non-scripture, particularly in schools where an ethics program is yet to begin. It is one of a number of significant implementation issues that disadvantages the ethics program in schools.

One source of this current misinformation can be traced back to the DoE response to recommendation 39 of the ARTD report, which incorrectly describes the current policy.

Recommendation

39. In revising the *Religious Education Implementation Procedures* for secondary and central schools the department should allow students not participating in SRE to continue their regular classwork. This provision would apply in secondary/ central schools where there is a low rate of student participation in SRE e.g. affecting more than half of the students.

Response

Not supported.

The current Religious Education Policy is that no academic instruction or formal school activities should occur during time set aside for SRE.

Examples of how this misinformation is impacting policy and coverage of SRE/SEE:

1. Motion at Labour Conference (July) to remove scripture classes from schools.

Associated media including:

- MP Jo Haylen's Op Ed, "["A disgrace': non-religious kids forced to waste their time at school"](#)" (also attached) The Sydney Morning Herald, July 25
- "["NSW Labor left faction agitates to remove scripture classes from public schools"](#)" Guardian, 17 July

2. Greens launch policy to remove scripture and ethics from schools (replacing ethics with an 'exploration of Victorian model') using the Balmain and Newtown electorates, due to DoE data showing these areas had highest rates of 'No religion' marked on enrolment forms

Associated media including:

- [Greens Media Release](#)
- Article in Inner West courier [Push to eject scripture classes from primary schools as religion not a priority for Inner West families](#) 7 August
- Jenny Leong interviewed on Mornings with Wendy Harmer (ABC Sydney)

3. P&C Federation's 2017 Annual General Meeting (AGM) endorsed the position that students not enrolled in Special Religious Education (SRE) should be allowed to engage in curriculum-related work.

- P & C media release [Education and Learning should be the priority for all students during class time in schools](#)

Some steps taken so far to address misinformation

1. CEO Evan Hannah and Communications Manager Heidi McElnea meet with MP Jo Haylen to seek support for a policy approach that supports ethics classes in their current format and removes misinformation and barriers to enrolment.
2. Several volunteers got in contact with head office after viewing the related media. Additionally, all ethics volunteers in Balmain and Newtown areas were then emailed with information. Several wrote letters to the editor of Inner West Courier ([Kitty-Jean Laginha's here](#)) and others wrote emails to MPs Jenny Leong and Jamie Parker (four were forwarded to our office).
3. Heidi McElnea met with Jenny Leong to seek support for a policy approach that supports ethics classes in their current format and removes misinformation and barriers to enrolment.

- Jenny Leong offers to present questions to Rob Stokes (via Greens education spokesperson Tamara Smith) and review Greens policy around SRE/SEE
 - Jenny Leong makes community recognition statement for Primary Ethics volunteers in Parliament
 - Invitations planned for Jamie and Jenny to view ethics classes and meet volunteers
 - Jenny offers to publish information about ethics classes in her community newsletter
4. Heidi McElnea and ethics teacher Imogen Boas secure 'right of reply' [25 minute interview segment](#) on ABC Sydney with Wendy Harmer
 5. Issues raised within context of SEE committee, and DoE response sought for SEE meeting on November 29