



Department of
Education

GUIDELINES FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

EFFECTIVE: 17 NOVEMBER 2015

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of religious education in Western Australian public schools is governed by the *School Education Act 1999* (the Act), which states that curriculum and teaching in government schools is not to promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect (s 68 (1) (a) of the Act). These Guidelines support the intent of the Act.

The Act refers to two types of religious education that can be provided in public schools: General Religious Education and Special Religious Education. Principals are responsible for their implementation in their schools.

GENERAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

General Religious Education (GRE), which can be included in the general curriculum offered by the school, is the sociological-based study of major forms of religious thought and expression that are characteristic of Australian and other societies in the world. The aim is to support the development of religious understandings and tolerance.

Teachers are encouraged to align GRE with the learning area content described within the *Western Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline*.

The Act also provides for the use of prayers, songs and other material based on religious, spiritual or moral values in school activities such as assemblies, commemorations, religious observations and multi-faith services, as part of the GRE that is provided to students (s 68 (2) (b) of the Act). These activities are determined by the principal, in consultation with the school council or board.

Parents should be notified of the nature of the GRE that will be included in school activities, and reminded of their right to withdraw their child from these activities.

It is recommended that schools respect the diverse background and beliefs of all students by not promoting any particular set of beliefs in preference over another.

SPECIAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

In addition to the provision of GRE as part of the school curriculum and teaching, the Act also provides for Special Religious Education (SRE) to be provided in public schools.

SRE, which is not part of the general curriculum, is based on distinctive religious tenets and beliefs and is taught in public schools by an approved volunteer who has been authorised to deliver a particular SRE program.

The decision about *whether, which, or when* a SRE program will be provided at the school is made by the principal, in consultation with the school council/ or board. The consultation needs to occur before any decision is made. At the discretion of the principal, feedback from the wider school community (via parent surveys or newsletters) could further inform that decision.

Where schools adopt an SRE program, the Department encourages a delivery that is based on sound teaching practice.

Creating a general plan

Principals are required to develop, in consultation with their school council or board, a general plan around the use in school activities of prayers, songs and other material based on religious, spiritual or moral values as part of the general religious education that is provided to students (s 68 (2) (b) and 70 (a) of the Act).

The plan should include:

- provisions for parent consultation and possible withdrawal of students from particular GRE activities, or from an SRE program (if provided at the school);
- an outline of how the 40 hours allowed per year for the teaching of SRE will be implemented; and
- appropriate review points to confirm that relevant religious education matters are consistent with current community views.

Informed parental decisions

In order for parents to make an informed decision as to whether their child will participate in an SRE program, GRE component of the school curriculum, or school activity that has religion as its base, it is important that they are informed about:

- the religious persuasion and content of the program, curriculum or activity;
- their frequency and length;
- their right to determine if their child will participate;
- their need to apply, in writing, if they wish to withdraw their child from the SRE program, GRE curriculum, or school activity that has religion as its base;
- whether the SRE program will be offered *before*, *during* or *after* school hours;
- alternative arrangements that the school has planned for students who do not participate.

Interpreter and translator services may be required for culturally and linguistically diverse parents, so that they understand the information that is provided.

Request to withdraw students from SRE classes

Parents can request the withdrawal of their child from any special religious education classes which have been established (s 71 of the Act). The request is made in writing to the principal.

Request for exemption from particular classes

Parents can also request an exemption for their child's attendance at classes at which a particular part of a course of study is taught, on the grounds of conscientious objection (s 72 of the Act). The grounds for conscientious objection may include the culture, values and/or beliefs of parents and students. The request is made in writing to the principal.

The principal will subsequently notify the parent of the decision to grant, grant on conditions, or refuse the request. Copies of the decision are provided to all staff associated with a student for whom the exemption has been granted.

In accordance with record keeping responsibilities outlined in the Department's *Records Management* policy, principals maintain a record of a parent's request for exemption. An exemption may be revoked if any condition is not observed.

Alternative arrangements

Regulation (47 (3) of the *School Education Regulations 2000* require arrangements to be put in place for students whose parents who do not wish their child to participate in a school activity, including curriculum content that is based on religion, or an SRE program.

Alternative arrangements should be meaningful and of high educational value, and principals should take steps to minimise feelings of discomfort, isolation or embarrassment on the part of those students who are included in, or withdrawn from, an SRE program or school activity, including curriculum content, that is based on religion.

Duty of care

In accordance with the Department's *Duty of Care for Students* policy, and because SRE instructors are volunteers, a teacher (usually the classroom teacher), is to be present during SRE sessions that are conducted during school hours.

School facilities vary from site to site. Operational decisions about students being removed from their usual classroom environment for SRE classes are made by the principal, and are based on the optimal use of teaching space and human resources.

SRE volunteer instructors sign the school register upon entering and leaving the school.

Teaching

Department employees are not permitted to teach SRE in the school during their hours of employment. Any condition of employment that requires, or allows, SRE teaching by a Department employee must be authorised by the Director General (s. 69 '3' of the Act).

Use of school facilities

The principal is able to approve the use of school facilities *before* and/or *after* school hours for SRE purposes. If Department staff members are involved in an after-hours SRE program, the program is deemed to be a Department activity, and requirements of the Department's *Duty of Care for Students* policy need to be followed. If Department staff are not involved in the after-hours SRE program it is deemed to be an external program, and the policy would not apply.

Applications for the use of school facilities and resources must be approved by the principal and formalised through a written agreement signed by the principal and a representative of the user group, as per the Department's *Community Use of School Facilities and Resources* policy.

PROCESS FOR FAITH ORGANISATIONS

A representative of a faith group (other than the faith groups already teaching SRE programs in participating public schools) can approach the Department to propose the introduction of a new SRE program in WA public schools. The proposed SRE curriculum and appropriate teaching methodologies are discussed at a subsequent meeting at the Department. Once permission to proceed has been given, the faith group trains and screens its volunteers, who must then register with YouthCARE WA as per an Agreement between the Department and the Churches Commission on Education (Inc.) WA.

The faith group can subsequently approach principals to ask that they consider providing the proposed SRE at their schools. The decision as to whether the SRE will be provided at a school is at the discretion of the principal, in consultation with the school council/board.

An overview of the content of the SRE programs provided in WA public schools can be viewed at the Department's *Religious Education* website.

SECURING VOLUNTEERS TO PROVIDE AN SRE PROGRAM

If the decision is made by a school to provide an SRE program, the principal approaches the relevant religious body for an approved volunteer instructor.

Volunteers providing SRE in public schools must register each year with the Department; a process administered by YouthCARE WA as per an Agreement between the Department and the Churches Commission on Education (Inc.) WA.

During the registration process, YouthCARE WA checks that relevant screening processes (such as *Working with Children* checks) have been completed, that the volunteer instructor has participated in a designated training program, been endorsed by their faith group to teach an agreed curriculum, and has been provided with a registration card for the current year. As part of the same Agreement, YouthCARE WA also collects, collates and reports data to the Department on participating school and volunteer numbers.

The principal should confirm that all SRE volunteer instructors on the school site have authorisation from the Department (that is; they hold a YouthCARE WA registration card for the current year and a current *Working with Children* card).

CONCERNS

Parents, students or teachers who have concerns about the content or delivery of an SRE program should communicate their concerns to the principal, who can raise their issues with YouthCARE WA (which, in turn, will consult with the relevant religious body, as necessary).

DEFINITIONS

Approved volunteer

An SRE volunteer who has been screened and trained by a religious organisation to teach an agreed SRE curriculum, is registered with YouthCARE WA, and holds a registration card for the current year.

Conscientious objection

An objection by a parent to participating in a particular class based on a personal, philosophical, religious or educational conviction that participation in that class would be prejudicial to the student.

School council or board

The School Council of an Independent Public School (IPS) is referred to as the School Board. School Councils and School Boards both comply with the requirements of the *School Education Act 1999* and *School Education Regulations 2000*.

West Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline

The *School Curriculum and Standards Authority* determines curriculum directions for Kindergarten to Year 12 education in Western Australia.

The *Western Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline* sets out the curriculum for all students from Kindergarten to Year 10; guiding principles for teaching, learning and assessment; and provides support for teachers in their assessment and reporting of student achievement.