

January 23rd, 2024

My name is Nikki Chamberlain and I am the chair of COBIS- Churches of Blacktown in Schools. COBIS is a not-for-profit organisation set up and facilitated by the cooperation of local Blacktown Christian churches of various denominations to fund the provision of teachers for Special Religious Education of students in Blacktown area high schools, who also run activities and programs to support pastoral care and well-being, as well as supporting the overall school communities in which our workers serve.

This proposal to remove DGR status to those organisations such as COBIS that provide and support religious education in schools would completely remove, or significantly reduce the ability of organisations such as COBIS to provide the community with what many see as essential programs and activities.

- At the heart of this proposal to remove the DGR status of organisations such as COBIS is religious discrimination.
  - The proposal undermines one of the state's largest volunteer forces. SRE teachers are a significant part of local communities through their work.
  - People of faith are 25% more likely than their secular counterparts to donate money and 23% more likely to volunteer time.<sup>1</sup> This proposal contradicts the commission's stated aim to increase philanthropy in the country.
  - COBIS which funds SRE workers in public high schools is solely funded by religious donors who are individuals and small business owners of the local community churches.
  - Blacktown Christian donors are not all wealthy and give from a place of conviction many seeing the value personally of SRE classes and workers, having themselves been students in schools served by SRE workers.
  - The proposal sends the message that Australians who hold religious worldviews and values are not a welcome part of Australian life.
  - The proposal implicitly declares the religious values of our community are of no value, despite studies to the contrary.
  - Many of our donors have first-hand experience of the benefits of the SRE classes in public schools and all have the experience of the benefit of religious education in some form or another. The proposal denies their personal experience.
- This proposal denies that SRE/Religious education provides established positive benefits<sup>2</sup> to the community with:
  - engagement of children with values and purpose that promote a healthy community.
  - engagement of children otherwise alienated from the school community due to learning difficulties/behavioural challenges - SRE provides enjoyable engagement with material that

doesn't rely on or show preferment for academic ability. There are many a child who are reported as disruptive or disengaged with school by regular class teachers, who show engagement and enthusiasm, as well as attentive behaviour in SRE classes and programs.

- promotes multiculturalism, social cohesion and the positive exploration of the social identity of students within Australian society for which more than half, religion is an established and important part of their lives.
- Reduces the likelihood of student radicalisation- students engage in material as approved by the NSW education department and established religious SRE providers.
- This proposal makes the removal of religion in the public sphere a decision made at an administrative level and denies the values of more than half the population who identify as being religious.
  - The number of lessons of SRE taught every week in NSW numbers nearly 10,000. That is a lot of people choosing to have SRE in their child's education. It also places more pressure on schools to find staff to cover those lessons if SRE classes are not an option putting further strain on staff arrangements.
- This proposal will remove religious communities and the benefit of their presence, outside of SRE teaching, from school communities.
  - Our workers are established and integral parts of their public school communities providing well-being support and encouragement to staff in often difficult roles. This noted support is generated through the shared experiences of our financially supported workers and the school staff. Our workers have in the past arranged together with local churches to provide appreciation afternoon teas for employed staff at these schools to thank them for their hard work. This in turn has increased a sense of morale of school staff.

In closing, it makes no sense other than from a purely discriminatory view that you would remove the DGR status for religious education in schools when it is very evident of the wide, established and welcomed benefits it provides across our Australian communities.

Nikki Chamberlain  
COBIS Chair

#### References:

<sup>1</sup><https://www.hoover.org/research/religious-faith-and-charitable-giving>

<sup>2</sup><https://ccd.sydneycatholic.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SRE-executive-summary-Nov2018.pdf>