

SUBMISSION

I am alarmed that the Government is considering withdrawing tax benefits for donations to charities that have DGR status for school building funds and also for organisations which provide religious education in government schools.

This will have a significant effect on religious education in schools and consequently on society in Australia.

Religious education in schools is a significant initiative which has proven and well researched benefits for social cohesion and personal well-being. It is a vital ingredient in developing personal life skills and interpersonal relationships.

Australia is renowned for the diversity of its peoples. It is a multi-cultural nation. Approximately 60% of Australians identify with a religion. At the school where I teach SRE we have teachers going into the school from many different faiths including Christians (Anglican and Catholic), Jews, Buddhists, and Moslems. Research tells us that one of the best ways to promote social cohesion is through religious education. (If not, why would private schools with a religious focus be so popular with parents?)

Religious education teachers represent Australia's largest group of volunteers. The Government states that it wishes to encourage volunteer groups. The decline in the numbers of volunteers for works of good will, like fire-fighting, is notable. Yet, you are considering removing help from faith based volunteer communities. Thus, you are discouraging the very people who would help you achieve your goal of more volunteers. SRE teachers and Chaplains are people of goodwill: the sort of people you say you want to encourage.

Not surprisingly, faith-based education is Australia's fastest growing education initiative. As I have noted, faith-based schools are popular with parents who sense there is more to life than a secular system can provide. Why are faith-based schools the inexpensive ones as well as the expensive, so successful? They provide something which a purely secular driven vision cannot provide: a sense of a greater good, the sense that there is something more important to life than individual desire.

I have worked in both state schools and private schools. I know firsthand the difference that, for example, a Chaplain can make to a school. Incidentally, one state school where I taught was transformed with the advent of a new Vice-principal, a woman who happened to be a practicing Catholic Christian. I remember walking into her office where she was praying. She was brilliant with difficult students.

In conclusion, you are punishing the fastest growing and most effective section of education, predominantly funded by Australian citizens. I reject your notion that faith initiatives in schools are of little benefit to Society. I urge you to reconsider your Report and its implications. Australia is a multi-cultural Society and the majority of its citizens adhere to a Faith. They know that a purely secular system cannot answer all the problems of society. Students should have the opportunity to hear and experience the deeper wisdom of great Faiths.