

# **Fairfield Evangelical Association of Scripture Teaching Board**

## ***Submission Regarding the Productivity Commission Draft Report 'Future Foundations For Giving'***

### **Information about our board**

The Fairfield Evangelical Association of Scripture Teaching (FEAST) board is a sub-committee of SU Generate. The board coordinates Christian SRE in the following six high schools of the Fairfield LGA:

- Fairfield High School, Fairfield
- Fairvale High School, Fairfield West
- Westfield Sports High School, Fairfield West
- Cabramatta High School, Cabramatta
- Prairiewood High School, Prairiewood
- St Johns Park High School, St Johns Park

The FEAST board has been coordinating high school SRE in the Fairfield area since 2007. The board is comprised of the following local churches from multiple denominations:

- Fairfield Baptist Church, Fairfield
- Cabramatta Baptist Church, Cabramatta
- Smithfield Baptist Church, Smithfield
- St Barnabas Anglican Church, Fairfield and Bossley Park
- St Johns Park Anglican Church, St Johns Park
- Cabramatta Anglican Church, Cabramatta
- Church of The Risen King Jesus, Middleton Grange

The FEAST board is also formally supported (including financially) by the following churches outside of the Fairfield LGA:

- Narwee Baptist Church, Narwee
- Georges River Life Church, Peakhurst
- St Marks Anglican Church, Northbridge

The FEAST board currently employ one staff member on a 1.0 FTE basis, a second staff member on a 0.6 FTE basis and eight volunteer teachers. This team of ten local church members regularly teach SRE to approximately 540 high school students. FEAST considers it essential that volunteers are supported by paid professionals to ensure students receive a high-quality education in the faith of their families using an approved curriculum. The FEAST board has a budget of \$180,000 for this purpose, which is entirely raised by donations from individuals and churches.

Beyond the provision of SRE teachers for the classroom, the FEAST board also works alongside schools to provide physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing support to teachers, students and families within the school community. Over the past couple of years this has included:

- Food hampers for families in need
- Beverages for HSC students completing exams
- Encouragement hampers for teacher staff rooms
- Voluntary Student Activities providing students with emotional and spiritual support

## **Our response to the proposal to remove DGR status for SRE**

The DGR status that SU Generate holds is crucial for the existence of high school SRE in the Fairfield area. In FY23, 82% of the donations our board received were from individuals or businesses of which are all eligible to claim a tax deduction from their donation. 'Is it tax deductible?' is a question often asked by those considering donating. In the lead up to 30 June, we often observe donations increase in amount as more individuals consider how they can claim tax deductibility. For example, in FY23, almost 40% of our \$180,000 budget was donated from April to June, and often extra inquiries on budget levels come in before 30 June as people consider where to give their money before the end of the financial year.

Tax deductibility plays a significant role in whether many of our donors will give and how much they will give. Without it, FEAST's ability to deliver SRE and support the wellbeing of school students and families will be significantly impacted.

The Productivity Commission proposal recommends the removal of DGR status for SRE on the basis that it fails to meet the following two criteria:

- i) *there is a rationale for taxpayer support because the activity is expected to generate net community-wide benefits and would otherwise likely be undersupplied by the market.*
- ii) *the activity is unlikely to be a material risk of converting tax-deductible donations to private benefits for donors.*

The FEAST board disagrees strongly with these assertions and is convinced that exactly the opposite is the case – the activity of SRE very much meets these two criteria.

### **i) SRE generates net community-wide benefits and would otherwise be undersupplied**

The Productivity Commission report displays a disappointing ignorance of the benefits of SRE (and religion generally) for the community as a whole.

The NSW Department of Education Wellbeing Framework<sup>1</sup> states that “*Spiritual wellbeing relates to our sense of meaning and purpose. It can include our connection to culture, religion or community and includes the beliefs, values and ethics we hold.*”

The independent Review of SRE and SEE (2017) commissioned by the NSW Department of Education states that “*SRE contributes to students’ understanding of their cultural heritage and is an avenue for their spiritual care.*” In addition, the review highlights how SRE builds tolerance in schools, promotes multiculturalism, contributes to a well-rounded education, and connects schools with their local community.

These statements from the NSW Department of Education about the positive community-wide benefits of SRE are in stark contrast to the Productivity Commission report’s declarations. It’s assertion that SRE does not benefit a large enough proportion of the community to deserve DGR status is unwarranted and unsupported. The vast majority of community members in the Fairfield council area are religious and SRE offers a service to all families of faith with school-aged children who would like to participate.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/student-wellbeing/whole-school-approach/Wellbeing\\_Framework\\_for\\_Schools.pdf](https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/student-wellbeing/whole-school-approach/Wellbeing_Framework_for_Schools.pdf)

Through SRE students experience not only the benefit of faith formation and spiritual care, but witness community service in action. Students are aware that their SRE teachers are sent from the local community and do this role for the good of the local community. This occurs in a context that often goes across denominational and cultural boundaries. Such service across community boundaries is something students do not always observe in other religious contexts, particularly in highly multicultural areas like Fairfield. This combination of receiving religious instruction and witnessing community service is formative for young people and for many is a catalyst to their own community service in later years.

## **ii) SRE does not create a risk of converting tax-deductible donations into private benefits**

It is highly unlikely there is a material risk of donors giving to FEAST in order to receive a private benefit. The vast majority of donors are not students, parents or alumni of the schools benefitting from the educational activities.

On the contrary, in FY23 approximately 80% of FEAST's individual/church donors resided in other areas of Sydney to the schools FEAST teaches SRE in (i.e. not in the Fairfield LGA). Donations from other locations have been necessary due to the low SES nature of the Fairfield area (e.g. some of the churches involved with FEAST are unable to fully fund their own church minister).

To support this, approximately 80% (this is based on our donors list as at late 2022) of our individual/church FEAST donors to FEAST in FY23 resided in other areas of Sydney to the schools FEAST teaches SRE in (i.e. not in the Fairfield LGA).

In addition to this, the vast majority of local donors have no direct connection to the schools FEAST teaches SRE in other than that they live in the same community. These donors range significantly in age and life stage, the majority not having children who are even high school age.

What motivates these people to give is not any private benefit that they may obtain from the donation, but rather a desire to serve and do good to the Fairfield community. Our donors want to support the spiritual and emotional well-being of students and families in the area, many of whom are refugees or have newly migrated to Australia. This motivation is driven by the Christian conviction that if Christ has loved us, we must love others. Not only those within our own cultural and religious boundaries, but beyond so that love is demonstrated to the wider community and world at large.

In conclusion, we respectfully urge the Productivity Commission to reverse the recommendation for SRE to lose its DGR status. We request the government continue supporting the immense number of SRE teachers who serve their communities week in and week out. We request the government continue supporting families of faith who choose public schooling. We request the government continue supporting the next generation who currently benefit so significantly from SRE.

Yours sincerely,

Fairfield Evangelical Association of Scripture Teaching