

Cailey Raffel

8th February 2024

Productivity Commission

Australian Government

Canberra ACT 2600

Subject: Opposition to the removal of Deductible Gift Recipient status for donations to Special Religious Education in public schools

Dear Commissioners,

I am writing to express my deep concern and opposition to the proposed removal of the Deductible Gift Recipient status for donations to Special Religious Education (SRE) in public schools. For over three decades I have taught children in public schools in NSW, WA and the ACT, both as an employee (classroom teacher, specialist teacher, relief teacher) and as a voluntary teacher of SRE. In each school where I have been a teacher, the school communities - parents, children and staff - have valued the presence of SRE programs and the positive contribution of the SRE teachers in the life of the school. In most of those schools, the SRE teachers were parents and/or members of the local community and were also involved in coaching sports teams, running fetes and serving on the P&C - countless hours beyond the thousands of hours of teaching given at no cost to the Department of Education. My own commitment to giving and volunteering in my local community is very much driven by my Christian faith and convictions.

Social capital is indeed built 'by contributing to social networks, building trust within communities and diffusing knowledge' - and SRE in public schools helps achieve this. It has a great net benefit to the community as a whole, therefore DGR status should not be removed. Moreover, SRE does have broad support in the community.*

Each of the school communities I have taught in had a diversity of cultural and religious backgrounds, as well as families with no religious affiliation. There was harmony and respect across those different groups which I attribute, at least in part, to the presence of SRE - both in what was taught and in the example of respectful relationships amongst the volunteer teachers. SRE benefits the whole community, not just those children enrolled in a particular religious group. The old-world language of 'advancement of religion' is no longer an accurate descriptor of the purpose and benefits of SRE. Research** shows that SRE brings positive benefits to students' mental health and well-being, strengthens the multicultural fabric of Australian schools, creates safe places to explore questions of identity and is effective values education, empowering student decision-making.

The inclusion of SRE in our public schools ensures that students are given an opportunity to explore both their own and others' belief systems, contributes to the development of their cultural competency and has a positive impact on social cohesion and respectful relationships. My current volunteering includes teaching English to migrants and refugees, from a huge range of cultural backgrounds. All are keen to discuss and hear from others about their worldview and matters of faith - they do not see this as private or inappropriate in the public square. I have found people who are new to Australia are very interested in our history, including our Christian heritage and its shaping of many of our institutions. Likewise, they are more than happy for their children to be learning about this at school.

Removing tax deductibility for donations to SRE will have a negative impact on public schools at a time when parents are losing confidence in public education. While the majority of SRE teachers volunteer their time, donations to SRE allows for quality training of voluntary teachers as well as funding for some paid positions and the development of age-appropriate resources. The removal of DGR status would also go against the principles of 'greatest community wide net benefits' and 'community wide support'.

I urge you to reconsider this proposed change.

Sincerely,

Cailey Raffel

* McCrindle, 2018 - 71% of parents in NSW schools chose to enrol their children in SRE, 99% of people believe it is important to teach values to Australian school students

** Study of Special Religious Education its value to contemporary society (Gross and Rutland, 2021)