

Sydney Secondary College Board

Submission Regarding the Productivity Commission's Draft Report on Philanthropy

About us

The Sydney Secondary College Board conducts Christian scripture classes at the following schools in Sydney, NSW:

1. Sydney Secondary College, Leichhardt
2. Sydney Secondary College, Balmain
3. Sydney Secondary College, Blackwattle Bay

Our enrolments and volunteer deployments are as follows. We employ one paid staff and 4 volunteers to teach 160 students from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. That requires an annual budget of approximately \$22, 700 which is entirely raised by donations from individuals and churches.

The board is made up of the following members:

1. Rev David O'Mara, All Souls Anglican Church, Leichhardt
2. Rev Dominic Steele, The Village Church, Annandale
3. Rev Mike Paget, St Barnabas, Broadway
4. Rev Stephen Hitchins, Leichhardt Congregational Church, Leichhardt
5. Rev Luke Tattersall, Campbell St Presbyterian Church, Balmain

Our Response to the Commission's Draft Report

The commission's report demonstrates a surprisingly negative attitude towards religion in general and special religious education (SRE) in particular which contradicts the Australian Government's commitment to multiculturalism and religious plurality.

Religion is not a "private" matter. It is certainly a matter of personal conviction. But those personal religious convictions have "public" consequences. Religious convictions shape and are shaped by the relationships, families, and communities which religious people participate in.

All major religions possess the internal resources to inculcate goodwill not only towards their specific religious or ethnic community but towards the world in general. Christianity can inculcate that kind of public, "secular" goodwill through the doctrines that the one God created the whole world, created all people in his image, and offers the one saviour, Jesus Christ, to the whole world (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2). Other religions inculcate it through, e.g., Hinduism and Buddhism valuing charity as removing demerit ("bad karma") and accruing merit ("good karma"), and Islam's tradition of charity ("sadakah").

SRE is a significant opportunity to reinforce this kind of public goodwill in ways drawn from, therefore consistent with, religious traditions. This religious consistency makes the teaching plausible therefore persuasive to young people at a significantly formative time. Young people who benefit from SRE can thereby grow up to be adult citizens who exhibit goodwill to people who hold different religious convictions to them, including people of 'no religion'.

This goodwill does not stem from a dilution of their religious convictions but is an expression of them.

SRE can, in an era of global fragmentation and increasing conflict, significantly contribute to creating an environment of intercultural, interethnic, inter-communal peace and harmony. It can thereby help Australia as a nation to possess the demonstrable moral credibility to be a world leader in achieving genuine peace in, not despite, diversity - a harmony which does not suppress but is on the contrary founded upon the particularities of communal religious beliefs. SRE can thus reinforce the principles of multiculturalism, multiethnicity, and religious plurality which have characterised Australia for decades.

SRE does a world of good and is made possible by an army of volunteers. It is literally multiculturalism in action, as the largest volunteer organisation outside of Surf Life Saving Australia, turns up every week to teach students in the faith of their family in NSW public schools. Volunteering is what makes Australia great. These volunteers must continue to be supported by paid professionals to ensure that students receive a high-quality education in the faith of their families using an approved curriculum. We request that the commission keep the tax deduction so that coordinators and organisations can keep supporting the vital work in our schools for hope, kindness and connection to something bigger than ourselves.

SRE makes a valuable difference in the lives of young people and supports the formation of well-rounded individuals who seek the good of others. Please keep this vital and unique educational experience which has been going for 170 years supported by professionals and parachurch organisations. Let's help build robust student identity, through an education that reminds them they are loved and valuable and give students of all backgrounds an opportunity to celebrate their culture and their religion at school. This diversity must be supported and nurtured by this Government if they claim to support all families of all faiths.

This is why we find the productivity commission's recommendation that SRE loses its deductible gift recipient status (DGR) status perplexing. It demonstrates a disappointing ignorance about the nature and public benefits of religion. It contradicts the Australian government's long-term commitment to multicultural, multiethnic, multi-religious plurality and tolerance. **We urge the commission to reverse this recommendation.** Instead of seeking to make the resourcing of public religious education more difficult, it should seek to encourage it, so that the various religions of Australia can play our part in blessing, not just our particular communities, but our nation and the whole world.