



CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS IN STATE SCHOOLS

Catholic Conference of Religious Educators in State Schools (CCRESS) submission to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report - *Future Foundations for Giving*

Introduction

The Productivity Commission's draft report into Philanthropy – Future Foundations for Giving – has provided a range of recommendations in relation to philanthropic giving in Australia and CCRESS, as providers of Special Religious Education (SRE) in NSW and ACT welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback.

This submission will focus on the recommendation to remove Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status for organisations supporting religious education in State Schools.

CCRESS is extremely concerned that the Productivity Commission in its interim report has recommended the removal of DGR status for religious education in State Schools as this action would have a significant negative impact on the communities we interact with, thousands of families and volunteers around Australia and urge the Commission to reconsider.

1. Community Wide Benefits of Religious Education:

The draft report assumes that religion only provides personal benefits, neglecting its broader impact on society. Extensive research, as outlined in the cited documentation¹ establishes the significant community-wide benefits of religious education. The Judeo/Christian heritage forms the basis of our society, community, and ethical principles. Australia is a multi-cultural and multi-faith society, SRE is an example where faiths work together collaboratively to bring great cohesion even in the midst of diversity of belief².

2. DGR Status for Religious Education:

The assertion that religion only has personal benefits and therefore should not qualify for DGR status is refuted by the documented benefits to students, families, and society including strengthening the multicultural fabric of Australian schools (Gross and Rutland). The removal of DGR status for religious education would undermine the multicultural fabric of Australian schools, limit parental choice, and create an environment that favours secular worldviews over religious ones.

¹ Zehavit Gross and Suzanne D. Rutland, *Study of Special Religious Education and its Value to Contemporary Society*,

² See, eg, Diane Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (2007). Gross and Rutland (n 55)



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3. Special Education in Ethics (SEE):

Maintaining DGR status for SEE while potentially removing it for religious education is inequitable. This approach undermines the diversity of educational offerings and limits the benefits of ethics education to society. **Special Education in Ethics (SEE) will maintain DGR status** - the conclusion to be drawn from the draft report is that ethical education with a non-religious base seems acceptable to the Productivity Commission, but ethical education with a religious base is not. This is unacceptable – it favours families with a secular worldview but sidelines families with a religious worldview.

SRE in NSW prioritises parental choice and therefore, funding for SRE should have the same opportunities as SEE. Community wide benefits diminish when there are different funding sources available as it shows preference to only those seeking a non-religious worldview education. This makes our schools less diverse and creates an environment that prioritises and favours a secular worldview. There are 98 Approved SRE Providers in NSW and one Approved Provider of SEE. Together we help to provide a multicultural education where all worldviews are welcomed and encouraged. Removing DGR status to 98.9% of providers severely limits the benefits of ethics education to society.

The current system, accommodating donations for both religious and non-religious worldviews, should be preserved.

4. Parental Choice.

Parental choice in education is highly valued, and restricting access to donations for religious education in public schools may lead to a privatisation of education, disadvantageous to families with religious worldviews. Currently, donations received for religious education in State Schools allow disadvantaged families with a religious worldview to have the choice of a public education for their children and not be limited only to religious private schools.

The specific goal of SRE in public schools is to provide an opportunity for all students to explore the worldview of their choosing. This seeks not to primarily 'advance religion' but explore deeper questions of cultural and religious identity in an environment of trust and respect³.

Allowing diverse educational options through equitable funding of religious and secular worldviews promotes inclusivity and upholds the principles of a non-sectarian NSW education system.

To exclude the DGR status of religious education in public schools could lead to it not being available in the State School system which would relegate access to religious worldview instruction to private schools and prevent those parents and carers who cannot afford or do not have access to a religious school to enrol in a school where instruction in their faith

³ eg, Diane Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (2007). Gross and Rutland (n 55).



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worldview of choice is unavailable. For those who can afford an alternative, removal of DGR may be a disincentive to maintain children in public education, which would privatise education further.

5. Impact on Student's Education:

SRE is a strength of public education in a multicultural and multi-faith society that should be strengthened, not inhibited, which is what removing DGR status would do. Not having access to religious education disadvantages students academically and limits their understanding of various subjects such as modern history, law, sociology, and philosophy. The NSW education system, committed to fostering holistic development, recognizes the role of religious education in supporting students' spiritual well-being. In their Study of SRE and its value to contemporary society, Professor Zehavit Gross and Professor Emerita Suzanne D. Rutland OAM identified four clear benefits of SRE in the contemporary context;

Documented SRE benefits to students, families and society –

- provides an effective values education that empowers student decision making, fosters student action and assigns real student responsibility.
- provides a safe place for students to explore deeper questions of identity;
- provides important psychological benefits to students' mental health and wellbeing;
- strengthens the multicultural fabric of Australian schools;⁴

6. Assumption about Diverted Donations:

The assumption that donations will be diverted elsewhere if DGR status is removed lacks sufficient evidence. There is considerable evidence (Karlan and Wood) that donors give relationally and that the provision of extensive reporting has a negative impact on donor contributions. People donate based on their commitment to a cause, and the removal of DGR status for religious education is unlikely to lead to a significant redirection of funds.

7. Charities Supporting Religious Education:

Religious education programs, regulated by the NSW government, involve numerous volunteers and organizations contributing to the well-being of students across the country. Removing DGR status could undermine these valuable contributions and diminish the positive impact on society.

The Commission makes the point that 'Philanthropic giving can – but does not automatically – build positive social capital. The essence of social capital is that it is about building bonds

⁴ Zehavit Gross and Suzanne D. Rutland, *Study of Special Religious Education and its Value to Contemporary Society*,



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between people and communities – it is not about the isolated act of making financial transfers. Notwithstanding the benefits of those transfers, the ability of philanthropy to contribute something extra – the building of social capital – depends on *how* it is provided. When philanthropy, be it financial or non-financial giving, is provided to do good *together with* others, it can build societal bonds. However, when provided in isolation *for* others, social capital is unlikely to be developed (Putnam 2000, p. 117).⁷ CCRESS would argue that it is exactly this type of good with others that SRE exemplifies. Thousands of volunteers sharing their time and knowledge with large numbers of children and families in our State School system. These volunteers are supported by donations from individuals who see the benefit in SRE for the community.

The presence of 1000's of volunteers of diverse cultural, religious, and non-religious backgrounds participating in school communities every week as they provide SRE/SEE contributes directly to the type of societal cohesion and benefit that the Commission itself states in the report. Defunding the organisations that support these volunteers would benefit no one.

8. A Gift to Society:

SRE is recognized as a gift from religious communities to Australian society, funded by religious faiths rather than governments. Preserving DGR status for religious education acknowledges the vital role it plays in fostering a diverse, inclusive, and holistic educational environment.

In conclusion, I respectfully urge the Productivity Commission to reconsider its position on the removal of DGR status for religious education, considering the comprehensive benefits it provides to students, families, and society at large.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Most Rev Brian G Mascord DD
BISHOP OF WOLLONGONG

SRE Bishop's liaison for the Bishops of NSW and ACT