

Friday, 9 February 2024

Dear Commissioners,

This submission relates specifically to the proposed withdrawal of the deductible gift recipient (DGR) status for charities that provide spiritual support and special religious education to young people in Government schools. As a K-12 teacher who has worked in schools in NSW for over 20 years, I believe these charitable groups should retain their DGR status in order for their important work to be upheld and supported.

Childhood and adolescence is a challenging time for many young people. It is a time when they seek purpose, direction and answers to life's greatest questions. However, some young people lack the home-based support structures and networks necessary to develop a healthy self-concept and sound mind that is fostered by faith-based education (Gross & Rutland, 2018, p. 9, 11).

Religious groups of all faiths, with teachings ranging from spiritual health to moral principles, provide an invaluable service to young people. The Government school context enables young people to seek edifying friendships, acceptance and belonging in these groups. For some young people, the availability of a safe space to talk and share during school hours is their only outlet for feeling heard (Gross & Rutland, 2018). I think back to my own attendance of SRE in primary school and remember how passionate and caring these volunteers were as they shared their knowledge and experiences. During my secular education in NSW, these sessions offered meaningful discourse that was not available anywhere else.

The proposed withdrawal of DGR status for the aforementioned charities can be interpreted as a direct decision to erode their work in Government schools. Anti-religious ideology is not reflective of a rich multicultural society where people are entitled to emotional and spiritual education in addition to opportunities for cognitive and physical growth (Gross & Rutland, 2018, p. 10). In fact, the recent *Draft Multicultural Plan* by the NSW Department of Education states that, "Cultural, linguistic and religious diversity is a defining feature of our public education system." (2023, p. 2) It further recognises that, "culturally inclusive and responsive education programs and environments enhance children's developmental outcomes and students' learning and wellbeing." (2023, p. 2) This encompasses extracurricular activities such as special religious education and lunchtime groups run by trained volunteers from diverse faith communities.

The consequences of the removal of DGR status for the invaluable work that is conducted in Government schools is two-fold in nature. Not only will it gradually reduce the quantity of donations for school-based initiatives, but it will also require funds to be diverted from a charity's general income to continue these programs, decreasing the range of services they are able to offer the communities they serve. Our young people are our most precious resource and it takes a village to raise a child. The provision of spiritual support and special religious education to young people in Government schools is not optional; it is essential to the thousands of young people who seek the connectedness of in-school faith groups, who may be at risk for a multitude of reasons.

Volunteers require training and resources in order to undertake the important work of teaching and interacting with young people. This costs money and everyday Australians are willing to provide their financial support. I implore those reading this submission to retain the DGR status of charities who help contribute to the holistic development of young people who attend our Government schools.

Yours sincerely,
Melanie Shelley

References

Gross, Z and Rutland S.D. (2018). *Study of Special Religious Education and Its Value to Contemporary Society*. Better Balanced Futures. <https://www.betterbalancedfutures.org.au/>

NSW Department of Education. (2023). *DRAFT Multicultural Plan: Transforming lives through learning 2024–27*. State of New South Wales (Department of Education).