

## Special Religious Education in Government Primary Schools – the Challenge Over the Next Ten Years

(A report from the Standing Committee.)

### Background

1. The Anglican Church, along with other Christian denominations and other recognised religious bodies, has delivered Special Religious Education (SRE) (also called Scripture) on a weekly basis in government schools since 1880. In 2010 the Labor Government approved the trialing in ten schools of an ethics course for students in Years 5 and 6. On the basis of an independent evaluation of the trial, the Government granted approval to Primary Ethics Ltd (a subsidiary of the St James Ethics Centre) to extend the teaching of Special Education in Ethics (SEE) to Years 5 and 6 students in other schools in 2011 if their parents had withdrawn them from an SRE class.
2. In response to an attempt in December 2011 by the Christian Democrats to have the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 repealed, the O'Farrell Government established a Parliamentary Inquiry. Its terms of reference were to inquire into and report on –
  - (a) the stated objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness and other related matters pertaining to the current operation of 'special education in ethics' being conducted in State schools, and
  - (b) whether the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed.
3. Over 400 written submissions were received from individuals and organisations. Some of those who made submissions were called to give evidence at the three days of public hearings. The Anglican Diocese of Sydney, represented by the Anglican Education Commission (AEC) was commended for its constructive and visionary submission with the Executive Director of the AEC, Dr Bryan Cowling, being subjected to questioning for over an hour on the second day of the hearings.
4. The Committee released its 120 page report on 30 May 2012 ([www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/gpsc2](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/gpsc2)). Most of its fourteen recommendations were consistent with the Diocesan submission. The AEC, acting on behalf of the Diocese, endorsed the recommendations of the Committee and subsequently wrote to the Premier to indicate its strong support for the recommendations and to urge the Government to implement them as expeditiously as possible.
5. The purpose of this report is twofold, namely –
  - (a) to outline the challenges faced by the Diocese over the next 10 years in ensuring the continued delivery of high quality SRE in government schools, and
  - (b) to provide an indication of the additional resources required for this purpose.

### The challenges over the next ten years

6. The teaching of SRE by voluntary teachers will need to be of a high quality and engage all the students in their classes. Though it may be for only half an hour per week in primary schools, it generally is delivered in prime-learning time. As parental and political pressure on schools to deliver quality education outcomes increases, every minute of the school timetable will be contested. SRE and SEE run the risk of being relocated to the afternoon or after-school if they cannot demonstrate that they are contributing to quality learning.
7. Quality education requires quality teaching. Voluntary SRE teachers will need to engage in continual training and development if they are to match their SEE counterparts and the full-time class teachers who have a very formative influence on the students for the other 29.5 hours per week. Our Diocese is acknowledged as a reputable provider of initial training of voluntary teachers but it will need to invest much more over the next five to ten years to sustain and enhance the skills and knowledge of these teachers. SRE providers who do not take initial and on-going training seriously will compromise the credibility of all providers and put the future of SRE at risk.
8. Quality education also requires the continued development of quality curriculum, quality resources and over time the competent and wise use of digital technology. At this stage our Diocese is well placed to supply churches with an up to date curriculum and resources (especially for primary schools) so long as all authorised Anglican teachers use them. The Inquiry has reinforced the importance of all providers (SRE and SEE) making their curriculum and resources accessible to parents via the internet. The Anglican curriculum for primary schools can be accessed at [www.whysre.com.au](http://www.whysre.com.au) and the SEE curriculum can be accessed at [www.primaryethics](http://www.primaryethics).

9. The quality of what happens in the classroom is regarded so highly by Primary Ethics Ltd that they have trained and appointed a voluntary 'school co-ordinator' for each school in which SEE is taught. They have also recruited and trained volunteer mentors to supervise, observe and nurture up to ten volunteer SEE teachers each and to help them assess the effectiveness of their teaching. They see this as critical to the success of their work. There may be a lesson for SRE providers in this.

10. Primary Ethics Ltd also places a high value on the creation of 'community' within each SEE class as well as 'community' among the parents of the children in those classes. They place a lot of importance on establishing and maintaining a good working relationship with school principals, class teachers and the parents in each school. Anglican churches which deliver SRE need to sustain positive relationships with the same people. This will become increasingly important if SRE teachers wish to access a school's technology for the delivery of their lessons.

11. For primary school principals, at the end of the day, it is the number of students who do not attend either SRE or SEE which poses the greatest challenge. In the schools which have collected data on why children do not attend SRE lessons, the most frequent reasons given are student disinterest and the inability of approved SRE providers to supply voluntary teachers. The opportunity for students to attend SRE lessons in primary school will disappear, not because there is an ethics alternative, but because the SRE providers are unable to supply, on a weekly basis, sufficient competent, enthusiastic and committed voluntary teachers.

12. In 2014, if the Parliamentary Committee's recommendations are adopted, the Department of Education and Communities will be commissioning a comprehensive review of the quality and value of SRE and SEE within government primary schools. This will be the first such review since 1980. It will give all providers an opportunity to demonstrate to the community how committed they are to the flourishing of public education and the continuance of this ministry in government schools. All providers are on notice that by the beginning of 2014 their delivery of SRE and SEE will need to be exemplary.

### **Resourcing the challenges**

13. The majority of the challenges outlined above confront the parishes and the people they appoint, train and support to teach SRE. They are not the result of the Parliamentary Inquiry as such. However, as the focus is now on quality learning rather than ideology, the criteria on which SRE and SEE will maintain their place on the school timetable puts a significant price on the continuance of this ministry.

14. Parishes face the challenge of finding sufficient voluntary teachers and equipping them and their students with the right resources. They face the challenge of building and maintaining strong positive relationships with principals and parents at the local level. This requires patience and time. They also face challenges in complying with new child protection legislation.

15. Over the years, Anglican Youthworks has been responsible for the development and revision of the primary school curriculum for use by authorised Anglican teachers; the recent development and maintenance of the SRE website; the development and delivery of teacher training; and, through its SRE Advisers, the broad encouragement of churches and SRE teachers. Although the Synod provides Youthworks with funding to partly pay for several advisers to train people for children's and youth ministry (including SRE), such funding is insufficient to meet the training challenges outlined in this report. Synod provides Youthworks with no funding for curriculum development

16. Having been advised of the challenges facing the Diocese following Dr Cowling's participation in the Inquiry Committee's public hearings, the Standing Committee requested the CEO of Anglican Youthworks, the Rev Zac Veron, to consider these matters urgently, including whether current diocesan funding is adequate to ensure –

- (a) the development of a quality SRE curriculum and other resources and the competent use of digital technology, and
- (b) the delivery of quality SRE education through the training and development of volunteer teachers, and
- (c) other models of presentation including seminar style to assist in overcoming declining numbers of volunteers.

17. Mr Veron advised the Standing Committee that since the 'Connect' curriculum has just completed a four year revision, Youthworks would not be in a financial position to develop additional resources for another decade and would not be able to provide the requisite digital and training resources without a substantial investment of funding from the Synod or the parishes. Mr Veron estimated that in order to implement an urgent accelerated rollout of digital technology strategy to address the challenges outlined above, Youthworks would require \$315,000 per annum for the next three years.

18. It is worth noting that Primary Ethics Ltd and the Roman Catholics are investing much more than this already in equipping their voluntary teachers for the immediate future.

19. The timing of the Inquiry and, in particular, the focus which has emerged from the Inquiry on quality learning as the criteria for ensuring the continuance of SRE in government schools means it has not been possible for the Standing Committee to consider how to address the need for sufficient funds for this ministry in the 2013 Synod budget. Unless the Synod in 2012 agrees to provide the requisite funding, for example by including this as a cost in its variable parochial cost recoveries charge for 2013, the Standing Committee should be asked to address this issue in its 2014-15 budget.

**Recommendations**

20. It is recommended that the Synod receive this report and consider a motion moved “by request of the Standing Committee” to enable the Synod to –

- (a) affirm its commitment to the sustaining of high quality SRE within all government primary schools within the Diocese, and
- (b) request the Standing Committee to address the need for sufficient funds for this ministry in its 2014-15 budget.

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee.

ROBERT WICKS  
*Diocesan Secretary*

21 August 2012