



MEDIA RELEASE

Synod of New South Wales and the ACT

Uniting Church in Australia

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Uniting Church leader calls for religious education overhaul

The Uniting Church has called for an overhaul of Special Religious Education ([SRE](#)) in New South Wales.

Uniting Church Moderator [the Rev. Niall Reid](#) today said research should be conducted to assess what interest or perceived value still exists in SRE.

“If it is found the community believes SRE to be worthwhile, all stakeholders should consult with the Department of Education and Training (DET) to address problems and possible solutions,” he said.

Mr Reid was responding to debate in a Sydney newspaper last week about a proposal for ethics classes to be run for students whose parents exempt them from SRE.

Some members of the Uniting Church, including the Executive Director of its Board of Education, support trialling an ethics-based course as part of the SRE options alongside denominational offerings.

Mr Reid said while religious organisations were not entirely satisfied with the arrangements for SRE and while there was merit in the proposal for ethics classes, it wouldn't solve the ostensible problem — schools' failure to provide adequate activities for non-SRE students. Nor would it solve the larger problem of how New South Wales students were learning about their own and other religions.

“SRE teachers are one of the state's largest volunteer workforces; it is unlikely supporters of ethics classes will be able find, train and accredit sufficient numbers of teachers to roll out the service they propose across New South Wales. Realistically, it will only be an option for some students in some schools.”

Accepting the proposal as it stands would also cause a problem for SRE because some parents would want their children to attend ethics and SRE, he said. “Religious education is not the same thing as education about ethics.”

Mr Reid said people who were advocating the ethics classes because they were opposed to religion would soon have to negotiate other competing belief systems. “Ethical positions are not value free,” he said. “It will be much more complicated than telling kids to ‘do unto others ...’”

He said adversarial posturing and misinformed debate in the media had distorted the issues that needed to be addressed.



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“As a partner in [The Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools](#), the Uniting Church encourages responsible, qualified and properly resourced implementation of SRE.

“At the same time, the Uniting Church believes that children who are exempted from SRE should have meaningful activities to do, as is required by DET guidelines.”

Current DET guidelines for the implementation of SRE require that no formal lessons or scheduled school activities occur during time set aside for SRE. Schools are to provide appropriate care and supervision at school for students not attending SRE but not lessons within the curriculum such as, ethics, values, civics or general religious education (GRE).

“The Uniting Church, like the Inter-Church Commission, is not opposed to general forms of religious education (or learning about other religions).

“We would like DET to engage more energetically with the need for students to have greater access to learning from and about religious practices and beliefs in Australia today. Religious knowledge needs to increase rather than decrease.”

Mr Reid said SRE in primary schools should complement the more general treatment of religious education (GRE) which is taught by classroom teachers as part of the Human Society and its Environment key learning area.

Ethics and values should already be taught as part of the key learning area Human Society and its Environment, he said.

“The Uniting Church recommends that there be a thorough review of all aspects of SRE in New South Wales and that DET bring all interested parties to the table to address all problem areas and determine to what extent offers like the ethics classes proposal can make a difference.

“We would like to encourage DET to revisit a previously rejected proposal for state-wide research into the current state of SRE in New South Wales Government Schools. The University of Newcastle was approached to conduct this research to ensure impartial investigation so that a broad picture of SRE in New South Wales Government schools can be ascertained.”