

## Review of SRE and SEE

Over a year ago, the NSW Government announced that it would establish a review of special religious education (SRE) and special education in ethics (SEE) in government schools in 2014. Since that time it can be established that the review will be carried out by the Department but that it will outsource the work by calling for tenders. There has been considerable discussion of the terms of reference and to date no final version has been published or tenders called for. Whether this work can be completed this year is in doubt and it is unlikely that the Government will want it out in the community during the run up to the March elections. It may set a time line for a report to be completed sometime after March 2014.

With such uncertainty, members of TCFNSW could use the time to consider some of the issues that will be raised and how if they become involved, including by letter writing, they might tackle some of these issues. What follows is a summary of some of the issues I can see for the review to consider. But first some comment about the process.

### The review

The review was one of the recommendations of the committee of review of the *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011*. It reads:

#### *Recommendation 14*

*That the Department of Education and Communities (DEC) commission an independent review of both Special Religious Education (SRE) and Special Education in Ethics (SEE) in NSW government schools to be conducted by appropriately qualified early childhood educational reviewers in 2014-2015 that includes the following (the numbering is mine):*

- 1. Survey of the nature and extent of SRE and SEE*
- 2. DEC Implementation Procedures for SRE and SEE including: parent/carer choice through the enrolment process and opting out; approval of SRE and SEE providers by DEC; authorisation of volunteer teachers and curriculum by providers*
- 3. Development of complaints procedures and protocols*
- 4. SRE and SEE providers training structures*
- 5. Registration of SRE and SEE Boards, Associations and Committees*
- 6. New modes of patterns of delivery using technology*
- 7. Pedagogy, relevance and age appropriateness of teaching and learning across all primary grades in a variety of demographics*

8. *Need for annual confirmation by parents/carers on SRE choice or opting out*
9. *Review of activities and level of supervision for students who do not attend SRE or SEE.*

The first issue is the recommendation that the review be conducted by *appropriately qualified early childhood educational reviewers*. This explicit reference to early childhood is difficult to understand given that the procedures for SRE run much more smoothly in primary schools than secondary schools. It may be linked to concerns about the appropriateness of SRE and SEE to very young children. But it remains a strange requirement that must affect how they perceive and prioritise what is happening across all schools.

A second matter is who might apply to do this review and be seen by the stakeholders to be impartial? Probably an independent education consulting group or a university with both including early childhood experts.

Many of the matters referred to here (Items 2, 3, 4, 8, 9) are already well covered in the DEC Implementation procedures and while being revisited are unlikely to lead to much change once all the discussion that underpins current practice is highlighted.

Item 1 is yet another survey. The question here is will it be a full census or another sampling to add to already existing data? The former will be costly and unlikely to add much to what is already known.

Item 4 may well document some of the existing training and put to bed a lot of ignorant comment about the SRE teachers having no training. And given the nature of the history of SRE it is unlikely to prescribe fully trained teachers but this is something that needs to be guarded against in the review because such a recommendation would severely limit both the future provision of SRE and SEE.

The registration of Boards (Item 5) would make them a provider of SRE rather than the persuasions that comprise them. There are some difficulties here because Boards are not religious persuasions as prescribed under the Act. NSW should not want to go down this track which has led to all sorts of issues in Victoria where the providers are Boards or registered groups.

Item 6 might highlight the need for good provision of distance education which could be a useful outcome. Placing technology demands to vary teacher delivery is not a practical outcome when teachers are visitors in a school for only a short time. Use of most technology needs set up time.

Item 7 is about using appropriate age related and context related pedagogy. The prescribed curriculum of most providers deals with this matter. To require more of the providers would be to require more of them than the DEC does of its teachers who have control of pedagogy.

## **Issues**

The key issues for supporters of SRE to focus on are:

### **1. The enrolment form**

The Enrolment Form has for years been a major problem in getting students placed in the correct special religious education groups. Schools have been reluctant to provide additional information about the groups operating in the school and have used the enrolment information incorrectly, often making invalid assumptions about parent preferences.

The latest changes to the enrolment card have placed more pressure on schools to disclose the actual SRE groups that will operate, but it has introduced other problems with opting in being at the forefront which will cause many problems in schools where thorough information about SRE groups is not supplied.

What needs to happen to straighten out this matter is for the DEC senior officers to instruct the learning and Business Systems Group to:

1. Place the "religion" question first and indicate that this information may be used for placement into SRE classes.
2. Put the SRE question based on information provided by the school about operating groups and include the option that the student not receive any SRE. The SRE nomination may be different to the "religion" stated in (1) and this format increases the pressure on schools to provide accurate information about operating SRE groups.
3. The special education in ethics question should be next and worded " If you have not selected an SRE class and there is a special education in ethics class operating in the school, would you like your child to join this class?" This makes it clear that this class is only available to those not receiving SRE.
4. The sentence describing special education in ethics should be deleted as there is no equivalent for SRE and neither should have information about their classes distributed by the school.

The reluctance of the DEC to address this matter properly is the largest cause of SRE problems in schools. Proper communication to parents and records by the school would address most issues about enrolment. In the review the DEC must be held accountable for the years of inaction and inappropriate action on this matter.

### **2. Secondary school SRE time**

Secondary schools have a time allocation for SRE for which staffing is not provided, hence the practice in many schools of finishing a period early one day a week. Other schools have integrated this time into a broader more flexible timetable. They accommodate SRE provision by withdrawal from timetabled classes rather than reallocate time specifically to SRE. Often providers are collaborators in this matters and don't want to get into a fight with the school about the provision of time. Withdrawal is not an approved method of delivery for SRE.

The consequences of these decisions are that providers are unable to have the same group for each week of the school year and often have to rotate between year groups or classes. When providers want to take a group for the entire year they are often told that there is no provision in the timetable and parents would react badly to students missing a major subject for one period a week for the entire year. Sometimes when challenged about the time allocated for SRE, schools don't actually know where it has been placed. But this should be the point of negotiation for the providers.

In the review, supporters of SRE need to highlight this difficulty of getting the SRE time that the Act prescribes. They are often forced into heated discussion and stubborn rejection when the school tries to maintain its current timetable and not accommodate SRE in an approved arrangement. Because SRE time is by negotiation, senior DEC officers attempt to negotiate between the parties, but often the compromise is a provision that does not allocate SRE time and is based on withdrawal. Too often SRE providers compromise for the sake of "peace" and some access to students. Negotiations are not between equals. The schools hold the upper hand and providers need to be first of all united, so that the school doesn't play one against the other, in an approach that the school can implement and then negotiate suitable SRE times to meet the needs of the providers and the school.

The problem for providers is that in many cases the DEC will argue that providers have insufficient teachers to accommodate all students who are available and this creates organisational and supervision problems for the school. It is important to show how secondary SRE provision has been increasing and the variations that have been introduced to accommodate SRE in secondary schools. These moves have often been resisted by schools.

It is possible to outline many other issues affecting the provision of SRE in schools but these two are the most far reaching and the two that have caused most problems for effective implementation in the past. If the review manages to deal with them then it will have been worthwhile. However, reviews and reviewers are notorious for acting beyond their terms of reference or interpreting them or information they gather incorrectly. The work of the review and its recommendations need to be carefully monitored and SRE supporters need to make sure they have substantial input to counter other perspectives.

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