

Fighting to be heard

How some parents are campaigning to make Australian schools secular.

Effecting political change is often seen as something beyond ordinary citizens, but local action can yield results. That has been the case with parents agitating to curtail religious instruction (RI) in Australian public schools.

The challenges vary considerably. All states and territories currently provide some form of religious instruction, but there are substantial differences. Western Australia and New South Wales have an opt-out system, whereby parents must explicitly refuse to have their children attend the classes. Victoria, by contrast, has an opt-in system.

Western Australia has only three authorised providers, whereas New South Wales has 110. In New South Wales, most providers are Christian, but instruction is also offered in the Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Vedic and Baha'i religions.

What time classes take place also varies. In Victoria, 30 minute Special Religious Instruction classes can now only be delivered during lunchtime, or before or after school. In New South Wales and Queensland classes must be conducted during normal class times. In New South Wales, schools are to ensure that "no academic instruction or formal school activities occur during time set aside for SRE/SEE."

There is no mention in the Education Act of proselytising or evangelizing, but Education Department policy stipulates that there is no inter-denominational poaching allowed in religious instruction. This provided a point for lobbying.

"They came back and said to us in writing: 'There is no proselytising allowed in state schools.' We asked the same question in three different ways and we got the same answer."

Proselytising

The next step was to purchase the teaching materials being used. "It was a sin and salvation program," says Courtice. "I went to my principal at the time and said: 'The Department said there is to be no proselytising which they defined as a student being encouraged to change their religious affiliation. But have a look at the program – that is clearly what it does.'"

"There were invitations for children to become a Christian: 'Are you going to follow Jesus? Will you become a Christian?' The invitation was to follow Jesus. The stated aim was to connect children with churches and church communities.

"I said to my principal: 'The department says there is no proselytising. You have a look and see if it is soliciting a child to become a Christian?' He looked at it and suspended the program

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The Queensland campaign to secularise schools was mounted by Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools (QPSSS). Alison Courtice, spokesperson for QPSSS, says the organisation has been dealing with the Department of Education for about four years.

"We have been asking lots of questions, trying to get answers to grey areas in policy as they relate to the law. The answers to many of those questions sometimes appeared to be a case of making it up as they went along.

"We would ask a question, they would give us an answer, and we would say: 'Well, if that's the case what about this?' And there were some interesting answers that came back."

One of the subjects discussed was proselytising, says Courtice. "We said: 'What does the Department think about proselytising, which is defined in Department policy as soliciting a student to change their religious affiliation?'"

on the basis that it proselytised. Three days after his decision the Minister of Education ordered a review into the Connect (religious instruction) program."

Courtice says the review "opened a can of worms". The religious instruction program was scrutinised by the Department and "they didn't really like what they found." The problem, however, is that the Department is not involved in the religious instruction program.

"The legislation says that the religious instruction providers decide the program. It is not funded, it is not part of the Department of Education's role to decide on program content because it is not their program."

The religious instruction providers also responded by seeking legal opinions that said that the Department could not stop them from proselytising to the children because proselytising is not prohibited in the legislation. The Department accepted that it was

the legal position.

“That was no surprise to me because the legislation (as opposed to departmental policy) does not prohibit proselytising. It was always intended that religious instruction was only to be given by an instructor of the same denomination as the children. So there was considered to be no need to prohibit proselytising because the instructor should never be in a position of soliciting a child to change their affiliation. They should all be of the same denomination.”

Courtice says in reality the classes are rarely divided along denominational lines because there are “simply not enough ministers or volunteers”. Consequently, co-operative arrangements became common in Queensland since the 1970s.

Persistence

QPSS persisted. Courtice says the Education Minister Kate Jones, who reviewed the religious instruction materials, then made a “public commitment” to strengthen parents’ consent and have them be more informed. Changes were made to the enrolment forms.

“Now, the question about religious instruction says: ‘Do you want your child to participate in religious instruction?’ There is a Yes/No tick box. If the answer is Yes, then you have to state the religion. If you put down Catholic and there is Catholic RI, you will go to that. Or if there is a different arrangement you will be allocated to that.”

Courtice says a new template was also provided that principals can use if they choose to. “Unfortunately it wasn’t mandated. The Department does not like mandating anything. They like to leave it up to principals. That basically sets out actual information about religious instruction. We have been trying to get schools to actually comply with policy and use that template to update their religious instruction records.

“The template also says schools have to give information to parents. At my school, they gave parents a description of the lesson aims and outcomes. Parents now have all this information and it is not surprising that numbers plummeted when parents realised their children were being told that they were sinful and would be punished with death if they didn’t follow Jesus.”

Courtice says QPSS’s overriding aim is to see the law changed to remove religious instruction completely. She believes another problem is that the Queensland law stipulates that religious instruction should occur within school hours.

“There is no legal ability to do what happens in Victoria where they have moved it to before or after school. But it does include lunchtimes, so we have asked the Department can it be moved to lunchtimes? They said: ‘Technically, yes but kids need a break to eat and play.’

“There is nothing in the law that talks about what the non-religious instruction children are supposed to do. There is no prohibition on them continuing with their curriculum work, or anything like that.

“The position that the Department takes, however, is that we

can’t let the non-participants continue with new curriculum work because that is an advantage over the religious instruction kids.

“Yet when my child leaves her classroom to go to her clarinet lesson, which is an extra curricula optional activity – just like RI, except that it is presented by the Department – the rest of the kids who aren’t involved don’t just sit around and wait for her to come back. They continue with their work and she is expected to catch up.

“As numbers for religious instruction drop, and more principals start following policy, you are going to have a minority doing religious instruction and the majority sitting around basically waiting for that lesson to finish.”

In South Australia, parent advocate Stella Thomas says religious instruction is not as widespread as in Queensland. Her aim has been to get express consent, as it applies in Victoria (an opt-in). This was included in a draft bill under the Labor government, but when the government changed after the election the new Liberal administration changed course.

“The Liberals thought the status quo should stay. John Gardner, the Education Minister, said there is ‘no mischief’ caused by the current system.” Thomas wrote to the minister, who replied: ‘Thanks for your concern but things will stay as they are.’

Religious instruction is not as much of an issue in the state as elsewhere in the country, according to Thomas. “South Australia is really quiet mild. There is not a lot of a fight to have; the issues are not as pointed. A lot of schools don’t have any religious instruction at all, whereas Queensland they have it across the board. Here, you will go to a lot of schools and they won’t have any of it.

“But I dig my heels in and say: ‘We shouldn’t have it at all.’ I just don’t see the Church having any right to come into the school.

“I would love to have religious education from qualified teachers. I would even support the idea of having an excursion to a Church from an educational perspective. But I don’t think having religious people going into school is an acceptable position.”

Courtice adopts a similar position. The QPSS, she says, is not anti-religion; it just opposes religious instruction in public schools.

“We believe that state schools should be free of religion unless you are going to have religious education comparing religions as part of the formal curriculum taught by teachers – we see benefit in that.

“You hear from everybody: teachers, principals, parents, that there is way too much happening in schools. There is pressure on the curriculum. It is absolutely a no-brainer to remove dividing children along religious lines for instruction in how to be a of a particular religion.

“If religious instruction is what is important to parents it is available in family time. There are places of worship in every suburb. Parents can take their children to Sunday school.”