



Sarah Mitchell MP (Education Minister):

I'm really happy that from yesterday [8 Nov 2021], we were able to announce some changes for our level three settings, which means that from this week, we are seeing some additional activities recommence in our schools, which also of course includes special religious education, special education in ethics, and also voluntary student activities of a religious nature in schools to return.

It's so important that we provide that opportunity for our students. And I'm just really pleased that they were events and activities that we were able to bring back from this break, because I know that for many of our students, it's a really important part of their school week. And I'm just delighted that you're back at schools and slowly but surely life is returning to normal in our school communities and fingers crossed for a better 2022.

I think that special religious education in our schools really offers our children that opportunity to learn about life values, personal responsibility from the vantage point of their religious tradition. For more than 140 years, children have had this privilege in our schools in New South Wales ever since special religious education was affirmed in the very first public instruction act in 1880. As a government, we remain very committed to the provision of both SRE and SEE in our public schools under the Education Act 1990. This also of course includes the ongoing support that we offer to schools and to approve providers from our Special Religious Education and Special Education in Ethics offices.

I think it's really important that for parents, that they can continue to choose the best option that suits them from all of the faith community in New South Wales. And can I say as a parent, my oldest daughter is school age, and I think it's wonderful that we as a family get to make those decisions. And we're certainly very grateful for the SRE that she takes part in, in her local public school as well. So, currently there's more than 100 approved providers of SRE across New South Wales, which is just incredible. And I think the range of these offerings in our public education system really shows the strength of our system. It's a diversity that reflects our broad cultural linguistic heritage here in New South Wales, and also the really important multicultural and multi-faith communities that we have right across our state.

So again, can I just say a big thank you of course, to the thousands of people. And I know there are literally thousands of you, most of whom are volunteers who play a critical role in teaching SRE and SEE in our school communities. I know as I said, as a parent, I'm grateful as minister, I'm grateful and I know so many of you volunteer your time because it's something that you're passionate about, and ultimately our children are the ones who benefit. I just want to quickly touch on one thing, which is the enrollment process and particularly the fact that we've moved to a new online enrollment application process for SRE and SEE that will be developed in time for the 2022 enrollments. Making sure that we can look at expanding or exploring the opportunity for an optional question on religious identity again, so that students of faith and families can be cared through that partnership between the school, the families and their chosen faith community as well.

Premier Dominic Perrottet:

So, I want to begin by saying that our commitment as a government is to ensure the SRE is stronger than ever as we move forward.

I very much want to thank you for the work that you've undertaken supporting students where it was possible, and looking at innovative and new ways of doing things. So, I just really from the bottom my heart really, really thank you all and congratulate you on how we've gone through and the work that you've undertaken over the last 18 months, particularly the last few months when we've seen many of our schools having to close to keep our kids safe.

...very apparent to me during this time is the importance of faith communities to the people of our state. They've come to the aid of people in need of food, clothing, and shelter, provided social support for those feeling isolated or suffering mental health challenges that's been touched on already. But also faith has played a really important role right across our state in keeping communities connected even through lockdowns. But faith communities are certainly not just important in a crisis. They are a vital part of any thriving community and society. Faith communities are naturally outwardly focused. They exist for the sole purpose of serving others and they all make a contribute to our communities out of that strong spirit of service that is very unique to people of faith.

...that is something that has laid great foundations in our state, in our country and particularly through our history. So, at the same time as great historical and current attributes, faith communities bring great joy and hope to many, many people. And the role that you do particularly for young people is incredibly important. Governments can do a lot but there will always be that specific role in my view of faith communities to enrich our culture and to make our society whole. And that's why I personally believe that a strong any strong, healthy society must make space for faith. And that's why I believe it's also important to make space for faith education in our schools as well.

And I want to ensure that no one is ever persecuted for their faith. We are united against any form of religious vilification. Special religious education, in my view, enriches our students experience at schools. It encourages students. Education is one aspect, academics is one aspect, but it encourages students to go beyond the academic basics of education and ponder bigger questions about our place in the universe and what it means to live the good life. It's part of the education of a person as a whole. And we should be really not just focus on the academics, but on the broader education of our students. And that is something that I believe and our government believe is vitally important. We also know that SRE, as it has been touched on, has a positive impact on student wellbeing and values formation, particularly the time we're seeing amongst young people arise mental health issues.

I believe, SRE into the future...incredibly strong connection to family and to culture. Public education in its essence is a partnership. It's a partnership between state and the family. But in that partnership I believe that parents must always come first. For families whose faith is an important part of their life, our SRE program ensures that they are supported and that's incredibly important.

...hope and optimism that is a brighter future ahead, and I look forward to being in partnership with you as we go forward. Thanks.

Chris Minns MP (Opposition Leader):

...that of parental choice. The choice to have your child participate in religious education classes is an important one. The result is a partnership between individual schools and local faith groups in their communities.

In fact, I'm a product of SRE instruction at Mortdale Public School in the 1990s. Of course, New South Wales today is very different from the 1980s or indeed the 1990s. It's more diverse, more multicultural with a wider range of practiced faiths. SRE is now available to all religions and there are now more than 100 approved providers working in New South Wales schools. I want to take this opportunity to thank SRE teachers for your ongoing service to your communities, to students and our public schools. The last two years have been dominated by an international health crisis.

I saw that the first day in my own house. SRE teachers produce material to allow lessons to continue at home. This help parents keep their children engaged and thinking about their religion. It also help parents answer questions every young person has about their world, their life and their relationship.

...the faith organizations in Western Sydney and Southwestern Sydney who worked tirelessly to support the needy, provide food and clothing, and of course, emotional and religious support, faith support. I look forward to seeing you again next year, and I'm confident that this celebration will take place in person where I can see you all face-to-face. Hopefully I wasn't on mute for most of that.

Prue Car MP (Shadow Education Minister):

...my own electorate of Londonderry of which 70% of the people I represent are people of faith...the incredible work that the SRE community at large has done during the last four to five months of lockdown. And now we know, of course, we're all celebrating the gradual return to life more back to normal.

Labor's support of SRE in schools, and our fundamental support of the right of a parent to choose for their child to participate in a special religious education in their faith. Instruction, in their own faith. And to many parents across New South Wales, we know how important that is, not just to learn the faith of their family, but also in many, many occasions it's used in a way to contribute to the world around us.

We know that SRE teaches our young people in our schools how to give back to the communities, how to be of service to their communities.