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|  | 2016 Changes to Special Religious Instruction  |
|  | Information for Parents | November 2015 |

Special Religious Instruction (SRI) from the start of Term 1, 2016

From Term 1 2016, SRI may be delivered during lunchtime, or in the hour before or after school, for a maximum of 30 minutes.

As it will be provided outside of class time, SRI may, where an instructor is willing, be delivered to multi-age groups of students.

The changes also mean that from 2016, Principals can decide whether SRI is delivered at their particular school. However, it is important that Principals carefully consider the circumstances of their school and the views of the school community when making this decision. Parents are encouraged to talk to the Principal regarding delivery of SRI at their school.

Principals should not consider their own personal views about religion when deciding whether to deliver SRI.

SRI has had a long history in Victorian schools, and these changes do not seek to downplay the important place SRI holds in many school communities. Moving SRI to non-curriculum time strikes the balance between ensuring that SRI is still able to be delivered in schools where there is parent demand and available resources, and giving all children and young people full access to the full amount of curriculum delivery time, which is critical for Victoria as the Education State.

## SRI is not compulsory for any student and will continue to operate as an ‘opt-in’ extra-curricular activity that students may only attend with their parents’ informed consent. All SRI will be supervised by at least one school teacher and will be on school grounds. SRI can only be delivered by accredited instructors who are approved by the Minister for Education, using program materials that are approved by the instructor’s organisation and are available for parents to access online.

## What is Special Religious Instruction?

SRI is instruction provided by churches and other religious groups and based on distinctive religious tenets and beliefs. For example, classes or activities that:

• make use of a specific religious text, e.g. the Bible, the Koran

• include prayers

• provide instruction on how to live in accordance with the tenets of a particular faith.

SRI programs are not provided by teaching staff, but by volunteers associated with a church or religious organisation.

Can any other, more general religious education be delivered in class?

The Victorian government has announced the introduction of new curriculum requirements in 2016 to ensure students learn about global cultures, ethics, traditions and faiths and to build strong and respectful relationships.

The new curriculum will be taught by school teachers, who will receive training and guidance to deliver the new content across four existing curriculum areas: Civics and Citizenship, Ethical Understanding, Intercultural Understanding, and Personal and Social Capability.

These changes are an example of the rich, contemporary education that Victorians can expect from our government schools. They reflect the importance of religion and ethics in our society and ensure that all school students, regardless of their background or faith, can learn about the ideas and values that define a modern, multicultural Victoria.

Government school teachers must not provide religious instruction other than general religious education. General religious education is ‘*education about major forms of religious thought and expression characteristic of Australian society and other societies in the world.’*

General religious education in government schools must be provided by teaching staff. On occasion, guest speakers who are representatives of a particular faith may be invited to explain the workings and belief structures of their religion. However, guest speakers must not provide instruction in their religion or promote their religion, and should not lead any events.

Students may also be taught about, and acknowledge, common religious celebration or festivals as part of the general religious education curriculum provided by government school teachers. This may include recognition of, and educational activities relating to, key religious celebrations, for example:

• providing an overview of the history and different cultural traditions of a particular religion

• making Christmas decorations

• dressing up for the Diwali festival

• bringing sweets to share as part of Eid celebrations.

All programs and teaching in government schools must be delivered in a manner that supports and promotes the principles and practices of Australian democracy, including a commitment to freedom of religion, speech and association.

## What are the supervision requirements for students participating in SRI?

The Principal must ensure that all students participating in SRI are adequately supervised by at least one school teacher.

The Principal must ensure that the supervision of all students meets the standard of care appropriate to the discharge of a teacher’s duty of care for Government school students.

Where SRI is delivered during the hour immediately preceding or after school hours, all students who participate in SRI will be supervised during any period between the SRI and school hours in accordance with normal requirements for outside of school hours supervision.

Parents must make appropriate travel arrangements for their child if SRI is delivered outside of school hours.

## What should I do if I want my child to receive SRI at his/her school?

If your child’s school does not deliver SRI, you may wish to approach the Principal to express your interest in SRI being delivered. The Principal will make a decision based on careful consideration of the circumstances of the school and the views of the school community.

If your school already delivers SRI and you decide during the year that you would like your child to participate, the school can provide you with the appropriate parental consent form. Consent can only be given in writing using the prescribed consent form. This consent may be withdrawn at any time by notifying the Principal.

What should I do if I have concerns about the SRI being provided for my child?

Students who attend SRI cannot be offered any inducement or other benefit to attend, and SRI instructors must not attempt to convert students to a particular religion or invite students to activities outside of SRI.

Any concerns or complaints from parents or others in the school community about the delivery or content of SRI at a particular school should be directed to the Principal. The Principal must then report the complaint to the Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division of the Department.