

Progressive Atheists Inc.

Est. 10 Jan 2010 | Reg: A0054119U

Proud Member of Atheist Alliance International

Member Group of Secular Coalition of Australia



Open Letter To ACCESS Ministries

10 September 2014

Dawn Penney
Acting CEO & General Manager People and Culture
Level 5, 695 Burke Rd
Hawthorn East VIC 3123

Dear Ms Penney,

ACCESS Ministries is a provider of Special Religious Instruction (SRI) and chaplaincy in Victorian state schools. Both scripture and the chaplaincy program are a violation of the secular principle (the separation of religion and state), thereby threatening the religious freedom that all Australians enjoy. The place for the inculcation of children into the tenets of a religion is in the home or place of worship - not in our state schools!

Special Religious Instruction

Following the recent Ministerial Directive 141 (new guidelines for the provision of SRI), the Victorian state government has changed Special Religious Instruction from "opt out" to "opt in", meaning that parents are now required to give written consent if they wish for their children to attend. When the Ministerial Direction was originally released, there was a stipulation that schools were required to provide a separate teacher and classroom for the children not attending SRI. However, not long after MD 141 came into effect, an amendment was made (due to lobbying by the Australian Christian Lobby and other religious groups) to remove this requirement. In practice, this means that the children who have not been opted into SRI could once again be placed at the back of the SRI class. How is this "opt in"?

SRI is a deeply divisive practice in which children are segregated on the basis of their parents' religion. This system unnecessarily draws attention to the religious beliefs (or lack of belief) of a school's families. One of the defining features of public education is the celebration of difference and the unification of children as Australians first and foremost. SRI is in direct contradiction to the ethos of secular public education.

SRI is disruptive to children's learning, with up to 20 hours of curriculum delivery each school year being halted to allow for the indoctrination of some children into a particular world view - predominantly a conservative right wing brand of Christianity. The non attending children are not permitted to engage in any core curriculum during the time set aside for SRI, so as not to disadvantage their peers. With a busy National Curriculum to get through, it defies belief that a state education department would enforce that schools stop teaching, so religious groups can use our schools as mission fields to make disciples.

The ACCESS Ministries teacher handbook unabashedly asks that SRI instructors take advantage of the innocence and trust of young children in order to indoctrinate them into a conservative sect of Christianity. Under normal circumstances, strict measures are in place to ensure that children in the care of our state schools are protected, and given every opportunity to receive a high quality education. SRI flies in the face of this duty of care.

ACCESS Ministries wilfully disrespects the secular principle, namely, the freedom of and from religion. Secularism ensures that every citizen is free to hold, or not hold, a religious belief system. The place for religious practice is in the home, or place of worship - not in our government, and not in our public schools.

School Chaplaincy Program

School chaplaincy was set up to provide guidance to children in our state schools. The Howard government expressly intended for this guidance to come in the form of instruction in "Christian" values. The underlying assumption here is that schools are value-free - which could not be further from the truth - and that the Christian religion is the most appropriate way to instill values in Australian children. This is not only categorically untrue, but offensive to the rapidly growing number of non-Christian and non-religious members of our community.

If children are in need of mental health support in schools, then what is required is a non-biased study done in order to ascertain the most effective way of providing this support. The ill-conceived National School Chaplaincy program was thrust upon the Australian education system - and the tax payer, at great expense - without any due diligence, community consultation, or evidence-based rationale. Mental health support providers should be professionally trained primarily for that task. Religious affiliation should not be a pre-requisite for employment in a public school; nor is it required in order to provide effective support for students.

Chaplaincy roles are increasingly being filled by individuals from fundamentalist, ultra conservative Christian backgrounds. Chaplains who espouse that LGBTQI individuals are "sinners", or that homosexuality is a "lifestyle choice", or that non-Christians and sinners may "go to hell", should not receive public money to "counsel" young Australians under the auspices of a government-funded education system. Especially since chaplains are not even permitted to counsel in the first place!

On behalf of all Victorian state school children, we advocate for their right to:

- be educated - not indoctrinated.
- attend a secular public school that respects the separation of religion and state.
- be taught about personal religious beliefs by their families, and to have that right respected and upheld by our secular public education system.
- not be instructed in the tenets of a religion whilst at school, or by government-backed visitors (as opposed to comparative religious studies).
- be treated the same, regardless of the personal religious beliefs (or lack of belief) of their families.
- receive maximum curriculum delivery whilst at school.
- be respected and protected at all times at school, and not be taken advantage of because of their innocence.

- be guided in the areas of socially appropriate behaviours and language by properly trained, professional teachers whilst at school.
- be assessed (where necessary) by a professional with appropriate training and qualifications. Religious adherence and training have no relevance in the mental health care of children in state schools.
- not be supported by an individual who may have an ulterior agenda.
- not be exposed to personal beliefs that have might cause them distress or harm, such as homophobic views, or the threat of eternal damnation for "sinners" and non-Christians.

Secularism is fundamental to a fair and free society.

Sincerely,
Alice Carr
President

Progressive Atheists Inc.

e. president@progressiveatheists.org

w. <http://progressiveatheists.org>

Progressive Atheists strive for a Secular Society!