

# Religious Instruction (RI) Curriculum Review

## Background and Criteria

By Peter Doyle, Retired Department of Education Principal

RI Curricula are referred to by the Department of Education Qld as RI Program Materials.

### Review Purpose

The Multi-Faiths RI Peak Body Network commissioned an independent review of Religious Instruction (RI) curricula in use in Queensland State Schools for the following purposes:

1. To check RI curricula for compliance with relevant legislation and Department of Education policies, particularly to check that content is age appropriate for the students being instructed;
2. To give parents, school leaders, the Department of Education, religious leaders and RI instructors confidence that the RI curricula being taught is of an appropriate standard;
3. To provide publishers with feedback on their curricula that could then be part of their continuous improvement processes; and
4. To provide professional support to instructors by providing annotations to curricula that may enhance the instructional process.

### Background

Queensland state schools provide religious instruction in accordance with Chapter 5 of the [Education \(General Provisions\) Act 2006](#) (EGPA) and Part 5 of the [Education \(General Provisions\) Regulation 2017](#) (EGPR). According to these laws, state school principals make available up to one hour per week for the provision of [religious instruction](#) to students (except Prep students) who are members of a [faith group](#) that has approval to deliver religious instruction at the school. More information is provided on the Queensland Department of Education website:

<https://education.qld.gov.au/parents-and-carers/school-information/school-operations/policy-statement>

In accordance with s.28 EGPR, religious leaders approve the program of religious instruction to be used by their accredited representatives as religious instructors. The religious leaders are responsible for the quality of the religious instruction program that is to be delivered in schools and are required to screen their accredited representatives, provide them with ongoing support and training and ensure they are delivering only the [authorised program](#).

In June 2016, the Minister for Education announced a review of the materials used by various Christian faith groups for the delivery of Religious Instruction (RI) in some Queensland state schools. This move was prompted by a number of reported concerns in the media and the

decision of a principal to suspend the program at a Brisbane state school. The purpose of the departmental review was to provide an impartial assessment by the Department of the consistency of the program with departmental legislation, policies, procedures or frameworks, to assist principals to meet their responsibilities under the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006; and to provide the publisher with an indication of how their commercial product aligns with policies, procedures, frameworks and legislation of Queensland state schools. The Queensland Department of Education reviewed three of the main curricula materials including Connect, Access and GodSpace, with their reviews available to the public on their website: <https://education.qld.gov.au/parents-and-carers/school-information/school-operations/policy-statement>. While the reviews found the materials were, in the main, aligned with legislation and departmental policy, procedures and frameworks, there were some recommendations for Christian faith groups and the publisher to address.

In 2018, David Baker on behalf of the Qld Heads of Churches commissioned Dr Kate Bertram, Professor S Rutland, Professor Z Gross, to design a rigorous curricular review process that would enable school principals to have confidence about the quality of Ri Curricula materials. A review tool was developed based on the draft guide for principals (Ref 18/564413 October 2018), and a pilot review was conducted. Feedback from Department of Education Compliance enabled the review tool to be refined.

In 2019, the Multi-Faiths RI Network commissioned Dr Jill Willis to convene an independent review process using the following criteria and completed review reports between 2019 and 2022.

In 2023 Peter Doyle, retired Department of Education Principal, was commissioned by the Multi-Faith RI Network to complete an independent review process using the following criteria.

## Curriculum Review Criteria for Policy Compliance

It is acknowledged that the Department of Education policies and procedures are subject to review and changes. The versions used in this document were current as of 1 January 2019. A review covers the curriculum as supplied by the publisher.

### 1. Area of focus: Education Act & General Provisions & Policy

<https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2006-039> Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 specifically, it does not contravene any requirements of Chapter 5 - Section 76 of the Act (Religious instruction in school hours).

Key points to consider during review of RI program:

- Religious instruction in a period not exceeding 2 hours in each week - lessons should be designed to be delivered in under 60 minutes
- Programs are designed for Year 1 or older ages

## 2. Area of focus: Education Act & General Provisions & Policy

<https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/pdf/inforce/current/sl-2017-0161> Education (General Provisions) Regulation 2017 specifically, it does not contravene any requirements of Part 5 of the Regulation (Religious instruction).

Key points to consider during review of RI program:

- Students may participate in a cooperative RI program delivered (by agreement of religious leaders of those denominations or societies) by more than one faith group, but they would not attend more than one type of class - In this situation, a RI program to support this cooperative arrangement and be suitable/acceptable to all denominations or societies in the arrangement.
- Not all RI programs need to be suitable for delivery through a cooperative arrangement.
- Only a religious instructor may bring onto, use, or leave at the premises a publication of a religious denomination or society (religious instructor may not leave a publication on the premises of a State School)

## 3. Area of focus: Education Act & General Provisions & Policy

<https://education.qld.gov.au/parents-and-carers/school-information/school-operations/policy-statement>

Key points to consider during review of RI program:

- 3a. Does not prompt the instructor to proselytise in cooperative programs
- 3b. Does not promote/require faith group publications being accessible for other students.
- 3c. Does not promote religious and denominational activities that are organised outside the school.

## 4. Area of focus: Education Act & General Provisions & Policy

<http://ppr.det.qld.gov.au/education/community/Pages/Student-Protection.aspx> Student protection specifically, it does not include activities or content that would contravene the policy. A program must not contain:

- Activities or content that harm or place student at risk of harm
- Activities that place student at risk of harm through the actions of another student
- Activities or content that place student at risk of self-harm

Key points to consider during review of RI Program.

- Definition of harm is any detrimental effect of a significant nature on the child's physical, psychological or emotional well-being. Harm can be caused by a single act, omission or circumstance or a series or combination of acts, omissions or circumstances.

- Definition of self-harm is harm that requires immediate medical or psychological intervention or includes self-inflicted injuries or other self-inflicted physical or psychological damage.

#### **5. Area of focus: Delivery of Curriculum And Needs Of The Learner**

<http://ppr.det.qld.gov.au/education/learning/Pages/Safe,-Supportive-and-Disciplined-School-Environment.aspx> specifically, it is not contrary to the Department's Safe, Supportive and Disciplined School Environment Procedure.

Key point to consider for review of RI program:

- RI program supports and promotes a safe, supportive and disciplined learning environment.

#### **6. Area of focus: Delivery of Curriculum And Needs Of The Learner**

<https://education.qld.gov.au/curriculum/school-curriculum/p-12>

P-12 curriculum, assessment and reporting framework specifically it:

- 6a. Supports all students' learning, including students with disability, gifted and talented students, students learning English as an additional language or dialect.
- 6b. Includes content and teaching strategies that are age appropriate to the proposed year level
- 6c. Does not include activities that may risk student physical or emotional safety and wellbeing.

Key points to consider for review of RI program:

- Program is responsive to diverse learning needs and capacity to support all students' learning with sufficient scope to respond with additional scaffolding according to need and level of support required by student.
- Age appropriate content and teaching strategies and aligned to year group
- Activities do not place students' physical and emotional safety and wellbeing at risk
- Continuum of support for diverse learners: Explicit and differentiated teaching for all; focused teaching for identified students; intensive teaching for small number of students.

#### **7. Area of focus: Delivery of Curriculum And Needs Of The Learner**

Student Learning and Wellbeing Framework specifically,

<https://education.qld.gov.au/student/Documents/student-learning-wellbeing-framework.pdf#search=student%20learning%20and%20wellbeing%20framework>

Key points to consider for review of RI program:

- A safe learning environment covers the physical and cyber spaces. It:
  - 7a. Supports students' wellbeing
  - 7b. Fosters behavioural strengths such as optimism, confidence, empathy and persistence

- 7c. Helps to build positive, appropriate relationships with peers, school staff, parents and/or the wider community.
- 7d. Encourages an inclusive culture.
- 7e. Encourages a supportive environment
- 7e. Values diversity
- 7f. Supports individual and group differences
- 7g. Promotes positive social interactions
- 7h. Promotes a safe environment
- Content and activities that will achieve all of above

### **8. Area of focus: Delivery of Curriculum And Needs Of The Learner**

<https://education.qld.gov.au/students/inclusive-education>

Inclusive education specifically, it:

- 8a. Supports a safe, supportive, inclusive learning environment, free from bullying, discrimination or harassment
- 8b. Does not discuss any groups of people in a disrespectful or derogatory manner
- 8c. Is responsive to the diverse learning needs of all students

Key points to consider for review of RI program:

- Definition of inclusive education - students can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar-aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs. Inclusion is embedded in all aspects of school life and is supported by culture, policies, programs and practices.
- Reasonable adjustment is defined and a measure or action taken to assist a student with disability to participate in education on the same basis as other students. It is reasonable if it achieves this purpose while taking into account the student's learning needs and balancing the interests of all affected.

### **9. Area of focus: Delivery of Curriculum And Needs Of The Learner**

<http://behaviour.education.qld.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/disciplinary-decisions/statement-of-expectations.pdf>

Statement of expectations for a disciplined school environment - promotes a safe, supportive and disciplined learning environment as outlined in the statement (cf. Safe, supportive and disciplined school environment)

<http://ppr.det.qld.gov.au/education/learning/Pages/Safe,-Supportive-and-Disciplined-School-Environment.aspx>

Key points to consider for review of RI program:

- RI is committed to ensuring every student in every lesson is learning and achieving within a safe, supportive and disciplined learning environment.
- Lessons are responsive to and supportive of the school's behaviour plan that is prevention-based.

### **10. Area of focus: Delivery of Curriculum And Needs Of The Learner**

<https://education.qld.gov.au/students/student-health-safety-wellbeing/student-health/smart-choices> Smart choices - healthy food and drink supply strategy for Queensland schools specifically, it supports a school's role in promoting healthy eating to students and does not promote or provide foods that would be classified as RED under the strategy.

Key points to consider for review of RI program:

- RED choices re foods that lack adequate nutritional value, are high in saturated fat and/or sugar and/or salt and high in calories/kilojoules

### **11. Area of focus: Delivery of Curriculum And Needs Of The Learner**

The learning environment is consistent with the Code of School Behaviour

<http://behaviour.education.qld.gov.au/disciplinary-decisions/code-school-behaviour/Pages/default.aspx> (cf. Safe, supportive and disciplined school environment)

<http://ppr.det.qld.gov.au/education/learning/Pages/Safe,-Supportive-and-Disciplined-School-Environment.aspx>

Key points to consider for review of RI program:

- Program fosters a safe, supportive and disciplined environment that respects the rights of all students to learn; the rights of the religious instructor to teach and rights of all to be safe.
- Encourages appropriate and meaningful relationships
- Creates a learning environment that promotes a consistently high standard of behaviour
- All members of school communities are expected to conduct themselves in a lawful, ethical, safe and responsible manner that recognises and respects the rights of others.
- The Code is based on the values of customer focus: innovation; high performance; accountability and positive, respectful relationships between people. One of the key underpinning principles states the foundation of positive classroom behaviour is effective teaching, inclusive and engaging curriculum and respectful relationships between staff and students.

### **12. Area of focus: Risk Management**

<http://ppr.det.qld.gov.au/education/management/Pages/Managing-Risks-in-School-Curriculum-Activities.aspx>

Managing Risks in School Curriculum Activities specifically, it suggests undertaking an assessment of identified risks, and identifies where a risk assessment would be required or beneficial to ensure risks are controlled and the safety of students is a priority.

Key points to consider for review of RI program:

- Health, safety and wellbeing of students, staff and others involved in program and classroom
- Activities, especially new or unusual ones, must be considered in terms of their inherent level of risk

- Establish context - who, what, where, how (age, maturity, number of students, nature of activity, equipment used, location, who is leading activity)
- Majority of routine classroom curriculum activities could be considered low risk - manage risks through regular lesson planning
- The following would only be relevant and in scope if a specific type of activity from these areas was part of RI curriculum. Areas where Curriculum Activity Risk Assessment guidelines specifically available are agricultural; science; visual arts; home economics; industrial technology and design; marine science; media studies; outdoor recreation; science; sport. There are also other relevant guidelines such as Australian Standards, working with chemicals, equipment and machinery.

### 13. Area of focus: Risk Management

<http://ppr.det.qld.gov.au/education/management/Pages/Animal-Use-in-Queensland-State-Schools.aspx> . Animals in Queensland state schools specifically, it promotes the responsible care and use of animals.

Key points to consider for review of RI program:

- Sound pedagogical justification required
- 'use of animals' refers to both living and dead or animals parts and includes live non-human vertebrates (including pre-hatched or pre-natal)., cephalopods (eg. squid), malacostracans (eg. crabs and prawns)
- Wildlife has specific processes
- Livestock has specific processes
- Consideration of infection controls, risk to human health, workplace health and safety
- Program demonstrates school's policy and procedures are used.

### 14. Key points to consider for review of RI program:

- Food and drink that has risk of allergic reactions not to be included
- Safe food handling procedures as specified by guidelines are evident in program.

<https://education.qld.gov.au/student/Documents/smart-choices-strategy.pdf#search=healthy%20food%20and%20drink%20supply%20strategy> Smart choices - healthy food and drink supply strategy for Queensland schools specifically, it does not include activities using items that may cause allergic reactions (e.g. nuts)

### 15. Area of focus: Parent and Community Engagement

<http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/parent-community-engagement-framework/>

Parent and Community Engagement framework specifically, it:

15a. Supports effective communication between students, parents, communities and schools that is inclusive.

15b. Supports a school culture where respectful relationships between students, parents and the school community are valued and enhance the promotion of student learning and wellbeing

Key points to consider for review of RI program:

- RI curriculum supports and promotes inclusive, effective communication and a culture of respectful relationships
- RI curriculum promotes a culture of student learning and wellbeing.

## The independent review process

Independent reviews of curriculum materials have been commissioned by the Multi-faiths RI Network to support Principals in making decisions about Religious Instruction materials.

As I have experience as both a Department of Education teacher and a Principal, now retired, I was approached to coordinate an independent review process.

I critically consider the curriculum materials for their compliance with Queensland Department of Education policy and frameworks, as well as their potential contribution to religious education for global citizenship. I then develop a summary report for the website.

The reviews for each of the curriculum materials are published as separate report documents that include the publication details, an executive summary, an overview of how the curriculum materials are organised, a one page matrix highlighting compliance, areas for caution and considerations, and detailed notes about areas of strength, cautions and considerations as well as recommendations for addressing any concerns.

As well as a resource for Principals, it is hoped that these review reports support the volunteers who teach religious instruction each week in schools. The report highlights areas of compliance and details where additional care may be needed with some recommendations for further improvement.

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