



Review of the GodSpace Religious Instruction Materials

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This report has been developed to:

- provide the publisher with an indication of how their commercial product aligns with policies, procedures, frameworks and legislation of Queensland state schools
- assist principals to meet their responsibilities under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*.

Publication of this report is in accordance with the principles of transparency.
This report is not Departmental policy.

Executive Summary

Under Queensland's *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*, Queensland state schools must allow the provision of religious instruction (RI) for up to one hour each week if approached by a faith group seeking to provide RI when students of that faith group attend the school.

Religious leaders are responsible for the quality of RI programs that are delivered in schools by volunteer instructors and are required to screen their accredited representatives, provide them with ongoing support and training and ensure they are delivering only the authorised program.

Principals should ensure that RI programs reviewed by the Department are implemented with fidelity. Principals should have oversight in relation to any additional materials used by RI instructors.

In June 2016, the Minister for Education announced a review of the *Connect* materials used by various Christian faith groups for the delivery of RI in some Queensland state schools.

Following that review, the Minister announced in August 2016 that the Department of Education and Training (the Department) would review all religious instruction materials used in Queensland state schools.

This report is not a Department of Education and Training policy. The purpose of the review is to:

- provide an impartial assessment by the Department of the consistency of the program with departmental legislation, policies, procedures or frameworks;
- assist principals to meet their responsibilities under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*; and
- provide the publisher with an indication of how their commercial product aligns with policies, procedures, frameworks and legislation of Queensland state schools.

GodSpace is the third most prevalent program used by volunteer RI instructors in Queensland state schools. Data collected in August 2016 indicates that GodSpace materials are used in around 70 state schools throughout Queensland.

The GodSpace RI program is produced by Burst Christian Resources which is associated with the Baptist Churches of New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). It comprises a three year curriculum for children aged 4 to 12 years.

The review of the GodSpace RI program focused on the consistency of the materials with legislation and departmental policies, procedures and frameworks.

In summary, the review did not find major inconsistencies with Queensland legislation, departmental policies, procedures or frameworks. It is envisaged the issues identified by the review could be addressed by the publisher with a few edits to the materials and/or by adding additional reminders for volunteer instructors about departmental requirements.

It is recommended that the Department contact the publisher of the GodSpace RI materials to discuss the relevant findings of the review and that communication occur with Queensland state school principals and with faith groups advising of the outcomes of this review.

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1. Background

1.1 Provision of RI in Queensland state schools

RI has been available in Queensland state schools for over 100 years following the outcome of a referendum conducted in April 1910.

RI is a program of instruction approved and provided by a religious denomination or society in state schools according to the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* (EGPA) and *Education (General Provisions) Regulation 2006* (EGPR) and is delivered by faith group volunteers. Classroom teachers do not deliver the materials, however school staff are allocated to supervise each group of students while RI is being delivered¹.

Section 76 of the EGPA states that schools must allow the provision of RI for a period of up to one hour per week if approached by a faith group seeking to provide RI when students of that faith group attend the school.

Participation in RI is not compulsory.

RI is only available to students from Year 1 in state primary, secondary and special schools. Section 76 (6) of the EGPA stipulates that RI shall not apply or extend to students enrolled in the preparatory (Prep) year at a state school.

When students progress to Year 1, they are allocated to RI classes based on the faith group nominated by their parents on their enrolment form or if their parents have provided other written permission for their child to attend RI classes.

Students who are not participating in RI receive other instruction in a separate location at the school while RI classes are taking place.

In accordance with s.76 (5) of the EGPA, parents may withdraw their child from RI by notifying the principal in writing at any time.

RI is not provided with a Queensland curriculum or syllabus. The Department has no involvement in the selection of content for RI programs. However, as with any program or activity delivered in a school as set out in the Department's *Managing Risks in School Curriculum Activities* procedure, the principal has a responsibility to promote a safe, supportive and productive learning environment and ensure the safety of all those at the workplace under the EGPA, EGPR and *Work Health and Safety Act 2011*.

Under s.27 of the EGPR, an authorised RI program is a program of religious instruction approved by the faith group for delivery to students of that faith group in a single or cooperative arrangement. The religious leader/s of the faith group authorises the program of instruction. The Department's RI policy, specifically the *Considerations for principals establishing and implementing religious instruction*, provides the following advice regarding RI content (i.e. authorised program/s):

- *Authorised program/s of RI are reviewed to ensure they do not contravene legislation or departmental procedures, and are made available to school community on request.*
- *Authorised program/s of RI may be reviewed to ensure they are developmentally appropriate for the intended target audience and feedback provided to the religious instruction coordinator.*

¹ <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/school-operations/ri-considerations-principals.html>

Within Queensland state schools, RI classes sit alongside a multitude of cultural, religious and non-religious viewpoints. While schools seek to respect the background and beliefs of their students and school community and respond to the directions of parents, legislation does not require consultation with the School Council, Parents and Citizens' Association (P&C) or the parent community more broadly regarding the content of RI programs.

The Department's policy advises that parents are to be provided with information on RI when they are completing the Student Enrolment Application and that authorised programs of RI are made available to the school community on request.

1.2 Review of RI programs in Queensland state schools

Following the review of the *Connect* RI materials, the Queensland Education Minister announced in August 2016 that the Department will review all RI materials used in Queensland state schools².

The purpose of the reviews is to determine if the materials are consistent with legislation and departmental policies, procedures and frameworks, including the RI policy statement³.

The Department recognises that each school community is different and RI materials used across schools will vary. There are dozens of RI programs currently available and in use in Queensland state schools.

Principals should ensure that RI programs reviewed by the Department are implemented with fidelity. Principals should have oversight in relation to any additional materials used by RI instructors.

Each review will result in a report that:

- provides an impartial assessment by the Department of the consistency of each program with departmental policies, procedures or frameworks;
- supports principals to meet their responsibilities under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*; and
- provides the publisher with an indication of how their commercial product aligns with policies, procedures, frameworks and legislation of Queensland state schools.

It is important to note that the reviews are not an assessment of the quality of the program, nor do they make comparisons between different RI programs.

1.3 The GodSpace RI materials

The GodSpace RI program is produced by Burst Christian Resources which is associated with the Baptist Churches of New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). The publisher describes GodSpace as being designed to introduce children to the Bible and the core beliefs common to mainstream Christian denominations.

GodSpace has a three year program that explores the Bible and Christian life. The materials are colour-coded for each year of the cycle: Purple, Green and Yellow. Each series has two Lesson Manuals (eg Purple One and Purple Two) intended for use in Semester 1 and Semester 2. All Lesson Manuals use the same general format

² <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2016/8/18/connect-religious-instruction-materials-review-complete>

³ <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/school-operations/ri-policy-statement.html>

but with different stories and content. In 2017, the Purple series is in use for all RI (across all jurisdictions) in which the program is used.

GodSpace is presented across four age groups:

- Explorers, for children ages 4-6 years
- Adventurers, for children ages 6-8 years
- Navigators, for children ages 8-10 years
- Voyagers, for children ages 10-12 years.

In addition, each lesson includes a plan for a combined/large group multi-age assembly presentation.

Each GodSpace Lesson Manual provides the materials for all four age groups together in:

- One Lesson Manual (approximately 20 lessons in each manual)
- Lesson Tools (visual aids resource for children)
- CD-ROM (audio & visual resources).

Children’s magazines (workbooks) are also available for each age group.

The GodSpace materials engage children in learning through games, memory verses, use of puppets and singing. Lesson outlines are divided into two parts:

- A Teacher’s Notes page – which introduces: “The big idea”, “Lesson aim”, “Highlighting value” “Learning outcome” and “Inside the story”
- Activity Ideas page – which divides a 30 minutes lesson into three parts: “Start Up”, “Get into it” and “Go for it”.

At the beginning of each Lesson Manual a Semester overview provides information on themes and aims for the semester. This may be a useful resource for schools in informing parents about the GodSpace program (e.g. Green 1, page 5).

2. Review methodology

The review of the GodSpace materials focused on six Lesson Manuals⁴ and accompanying Lesson Tools and children’s magazines (Explorers, Adventurers, Navigators, Voyagers).

The key aims of the review were to determine whether these materials are consistent with:

- legislation (specifically s.76 of the EGPA and Part 5 of the EGPR)
- departmental policies, procedures and frameworks, including but not limited to:
 - religious instruction
 - health and wellbeing
 - managing risks in school curriculum activities
 - inclusive education
 - student protection
 - safe, supportive and disciplined school communities.

⁴ 2 Lesson Manuals and 2 Lesson Tools books for each colour-coded series: Purple, Green and Yellow

3. Findings

3.1 Consistency with legislation and departmental policies, procedures and frameworks

Regardless of the jurisdiction in which volunteer instructors are operating, all RI instructors need to be familiar and compliant with the policies, procedures and requirements of the jurisdiction and schools at which they are instructing. Burst Christian Resources may wish to consider including a statement to this effect in each Lesson Manual, in training materials, on websites, and in any regular communications provided to its customers.

3.1.1 RI policy statement

The review did not find significant inconsistencies with the Department's RI policy statement.

The reviewers acknowledged that in each Lesson Manual a statement was included advising volunteer RI instructors to be mindful of not stating bible stories or references as historical facts and prefacing statements with "I believe" or "The Bible says" etc:

- *"Imagine the school principal and the children's parents in the classroom with you. It shouldn't change what you say, but may change the way you say it. Don't state things as facts if they are really beliefs. 'Own' beliefs by prefacing them with 'I believe', or ground them with phrases like: 'The Bible says' or 'Christians believe'"*

Each lesson finishes with either the prayer, singing or reading quotes/verses. To respect the rights of students, Queensland instructors should be advised throughout the materials that while all students are invited to participate in prayers, students should not be forced to participate in prayer and may instead sit quietly for the duration of the prayer.

Recruiting

A guiding principle to achieving the objects of the EGPA is that parents may choose a suitable education environment for their children⁵. RI instructors should not direct students in their RI class to try to recruit other students to RI as this is not in accordance with a parents' right to choose whether their child experiences the messages delivered in RI. Children in our schools come from diverse backgrounds and it is important that RI instructors encourage respectful relationships.

Some examples were found of students being encouraged to recruit others. RI instructors should be reminded in the Teacher's Notes that students should not be encouraged to recruit other students at the school.

3.1.2 Student Health and Wellbeing, and Safe and Supportive School Communities

A small number of lessons were identified in which topics covered may have the potential to affect the social and emotional wellbeing of particular students who are vulnerable to depression, who are in a fragile state, or who may blame themselves for things happening around them such as a family break up or death of a loved one.

⁵ <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLTN/CURRENT/E/EducGenPrA06.pdf>

The Teacher's Notes to such lessons generally warn volunteer instructors to refrain from discussing violent or inappropriate content with RI classes. For example:

- *Hot Teaching Tip: "No one can deny that the Bible contains much violence, however, that doesn't give us a licence to expose children to stories of violence carelessly. With groups of children, particularly if you don't know their background and their parents are not present, or if you have no way of knowing how they might respond, it's essential to focus on the positive only. The lesson has been carefully designed to be appropriate in school settings and avoid adverse reactions – stick to it."* (Yellow 2, p. 70)
- *Teacher's Notes: "The killing of the babies (Matthew 2:16-19) has been purposely left out of the story as the focus is the wise men coming to honour Jesus as king. We do not want to censor the Bible but we also do not want to be side-tracked by what are often violent images that may upset younger children. Stop the story at verse 12 to avoid upsetting some children."* (Green 2, p. 110)
- *Hot Teaching Tip: "When using magazines or newspapers go through them first and remove anything that the children's parents might not want them to see, or that might cause them distress (e.g. pictures of an accident) or anything that could distract from the task you want them to do."* (Purple 2, p. 32)

Due to the potential to affect the social and emotional wellbeing of particular students, the Department advises that volunteer RI instructors should consider carefully, with sensitivity and use caution with regard to any discussions about human sacrifice, animal sacrifice, diets or body image with school students.

Use of food in RI lessons

It is not advisable for volunteer RI instructors to bring food into class for distribution to students, especially foods that do not comply with the *Smart Choices – Healthy Food and Drink Supply Strategy*. Queensland schools have processes in place regarding food allergies and healthy eating.

4 Conclusions

The review of the GodSpace materials did not find major inconsistencies with Queensland legislation, departmental policies, procedures or frameworks.

It is envisaged many of the issues identified in this report could be addressed through negotiation with the publisher and advice for instructors about departmental requirements.

The current requirement for school staff to be present in RI classes will continue to provide a safeguard and should ensure that any inconsistencies with departmental requirements are actively monitored and raised with school principals if required.

5 Recommendations

5.1 Revision of GodSpace materials

It is recommended the Department request the publisher consider appropriate action to address the relevant findings of this review.

It would also be beneficial for the Lesson Manuals to advise instructors to become familiar with relevant state Education Department and school policies and procedures (such as student protection, health and safety,

student wellbeing), in the state in which the program is being delivered. It is suggested that this message should also be included in any training programs, websites, and in regular communications with customers.

5.2 Communicate with Principals

Principals have been advised that, once finalised, the outcomes of the review will be communicated. It is recommended that, through these communications, principals be reminded of the need to adhere to the Department's RI policy statement.

5.3 Communicate with faith groups who use GodSpace materials

It is recommended that communication occurs with the Christian faith groups in Queensland that are known to use GodSpace RI materials in state schools to advise of the outcome of the review and highlight the issues raised. Volunteer instructors should be reminded to ensure they understand and comply with relevant departmental and school policies and procedures (such as student protection, health and safety, student wellbeing).

POSTSCRIPT AUGUST 2017:

The Queensland Department of Education and Training *Review of the GodSpace Religious Instruction Materials* (2017) recommended that the publishers revise materials to ensure consistency with legislation and departmental policies, procedures and frameworks.

In April 2017, GodSpace advised the Department that the improvements identified in the review would be incorporated into future editions of the GodSpace resource and committed to advising existing users of any changes to the (then) current material.