



Report on the Review of the GodSpace Religious Instruction Materials

March 2017

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 have a role in reviewing programs offered within their school to satisfy their legislated responsibility to promote a safe, supportive and productive learning environment, and to fulfil their duty of care for students.

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.

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.

Please note: This review does not represent Department of Education and Training endorsement or approval of the program's religious content. The purpose of the Department's RI materials reviews is to provide guidance to Queensland state schools as to whether the program complies with departmental policies, procedures and applicable law.

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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.

The EGPA (s.76) 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. As outlined in s.76 (6) of the EGPA, 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 to principals 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. As suggested in the review of the *Connect* religious materials², the RI policy *Considerations for principals establishing and implementing religious instruction* document is being updated to include a recommendation that principals provide details of the authorised program/materials to the P&C for feedback.

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 schools³.

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 statement⁴.

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 must continue to make decisions about the use of programs within their school to satisfy their legislated responsibility to promote a safe, supportive and productive learning environment, and fulfil their duty of care for students.

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. The reports will use examples to illustrate any areas of concern identified, although not necessarily provide an exhaustive list of every instance the program is considered in breach of policy, procedures or frameworks
- supports principals in their decisions about use of RI programs within their school and their legislated responsibility to promote a safe, supportive and productive learning environment, as well as their duty of care for students
- 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. The reviews will provide a resource for schools to support local decision-making, but do not represent an endorsement, confirmation or commendation of the product for use with Queensland state school students.

The order of the Department's review of RI materials has been based on the prevalence of use of each program in Queensland state schools. Data collected in August 2016 found that GodSpace is the third most frequently delivered RI program in Queensland state schools and used in around 70 schools.

It should be noted that the *Report on the Review of the Connect Religious Instruction materials*⁵ explored a range of broader issues including data collection, parental consent for RI participation, and definitions of

² <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/school-operations/docs/report-connect-materials.pdf>

³ <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2016/8/18/connect-religious-instruction-materials-review-complete>

⁴ <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/school-operations/ri-policy-statement.html>

⁵ <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/school-operations/docs/report-connect-materials.pdf>

evangelising and proselytising. Discussion of these issues was appropriate in that report because it was the first review to occur. These issues will not be further discussed in this report.

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 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 Manuals⁶ and accompanying Lesson Tools and children's magazines (Explorers, Adventurers, Navigators, Voyagers).

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

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.

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.

Evangelising

While not explicitly prohibited by the EGPA or EGPR, nor referenced in the RI policy statement, the Department expects schools to take appropriate action if aware that students participating in RI are evangelising to students who do not participate in their RI class, given this could adversely affect the school's ability to provide a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for all students.

Some examples were found of students being encouraged to evangelise to others:

- *“Say: We can share these things with people who don’t know about Jesus”. “Prayer: Dear God, please help us to share what we know about Jesus with other people, and to use what we know to help others. Amen.” (Purple 2, p. 33)*
- *“Say: Knowing about Jesus is a very important thing to know. We can tell others about Jesus too!”. “Prayer: Dear God, please help us to use our knowledge to help others. Especially help us to let others know about Jesus. Amen.” (Purple 2, p. 34)*
- *“Encourage the group to think about things we could do for God, even if it takes a lot of courage, like: Making a speech at assembly about something that matters to God.” (Green 1, p. 118)*
- *“Say: Yes! God wants us to use our words and actions to help others to follow Jesus.” (Purple 2, p. 15)*

RI instructors should be reminded in the Teacher’s Notes for these lessons that students should not be encouraged to evangelise to 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.

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)*

The Department does not consider it appropriate for volunteer instructors to discuss child sacrifice, animal sacrifice or diets with school students. Reviewers noted concerns with the following references which should not be included in lessons delivered in Queensland state school RI classes:

- A reference to child sacrifice in the teacher’s background information and not intended for discussion with students: *“during this period (Old Testament) other cultures held very poor views about children. Some saw children as possessions, a commodity to be sold, while some thought that children should be used as innocent sacrifices, killed when the ‘gods’ were angry.” (Green 2, p. 69).* If it is necessary to keep this reference in the teacher’s background information, then an explicit statement should be included to indicate that child sacrifice should not be discussed with students in any lesson.
- *“How do you think they worshipped these idols? (sacrificed animals to them...).* (Yellow 2, p. 35). Animal sacrifice is not considered appropriate for discussion with students by a volunteer RI instructor.

- Take the group outside onto a grassed area. Play a game of Slave Tag. *“Say: Joseph was sold as a slave. Slaves were dragged around until sold to a master. In this game of a tag we will start with a ‘slave trader’. The ‘slave trader’ tips (tags) a person and the tagged person becomes a ‘slave’ and must link hands (arms) with the ‘slave trader’. These two then chase after other ‘slaves’. When the group is 8 people long, divide the group into two lines of ‘slaves’ who then continue to chase others until all the children are ‘slaves’ (caught).”* (Yellow 1, p. 108). Playing a game of ‘slaves’ is not considered appropriate in an RI class in Queensland state schools.
- *“Hand out scrap paper and ask people to write on it YES if they think most other people look better than them.”* (Green 1, p. 30). While the proposed discussion is intended to convey a positive message, it is not considered appropriate for a volunteer RI instructor to be discussing body image with 10-12 year old students. An alternative activity should be used in Queensland state schools.
- *“Feed us only vegetables and water and then you can see how strong we are.” Three years later, after eating vegies only: “Yes! It was Daniel and his friends. They were the strongest, the healthiest and also the wisest men of all.”* (Purple 2, p. 43). This is inconsistent with the balanced and healthy eating promoted under the Department’s Smart Choices – *Healthy Food and Drink Supply Strategy*.

Concerns were also raised regarding health and hygiene in an activity in which volunteer instructors were advised to blow up balloons and deflate them, then to have children blow the balloons up.

- *‘Blow Up’ Memory Verse: Before class time blow up the balloons and write a word from the memory verse on each one then deflate them. Select different children to blow up the balloons and have everyone read the words in order.* (Green 1, p. 34 and p. 37)

A few lessons were identified in which it was suggested that volunteer instructors may distribute treats (small Easter eggs, lollies) to students, however, in each instance, volunteer instructors were advised to seek permission prior to distributing any treats.

- *“Required resources: Biscuits, icing and red lollies / sprinkles – Ask permission to use them.”* (Yellow 1, p. 34)
- *“Required resources: Small chocolate eggs – check with the school that it’s OK to hand out.”* (Green 1, p. 61)

3.1.3. Inclusive Education

The Department’s Inclusive Education policy states: “Inclusive education provides all students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability or socio-economic background or geographic location”⁷.

An example used in a lesson for 10-12 year-olds uses a story about Nelson Mandela to highlight the power of forgiveness. The example uses the terms ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’, specifically noting that these are the “terms used by South African leaders” (Green 1, p.36).

There is potential that use of these terms may draw unwanted attention to students within the class or school. It would be preferable that discussion of forgiveness by the volunteer RI instructor does not include the use of this example. The version of this lesson used with younger students focuses on the story of the prodigal son. This would also be appropriate for use with 10-12 year olds.

⁷ <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/inclusive/index.html>

4 Conclusions

The review of the GodSpace materials did not find major inconsistencies with legislation, departmental policies, procedures or frameworks. However, the examples identified could be addressed with the publisher and advice given to volunteer religious 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.

5 Recommendations

5.1 Revision of GodSpace materials

It is recommended the Department request the publisher to 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).