



Review of the ACCESS ministries' 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 RI 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;
- support 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.

The review of the ACCESS ministries' RI materials 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 ACCESS ministries' 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.*

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

- *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.*

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* religious materials, the Queensland Minister for Education announced in August 2016 that the Department would 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 Religious Instruction 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;
- assist 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 the policies, procedures and frameworks 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 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 ACCESS ministries' programs are the second most delivered programs in Queensland state schools and used in more than 90 schools.

1.3 The ACCESS ministries' RI materials

ACCESS ministries is an interdenominational Christian organisation, based in Victoria, that is predominantly focussed on providing Special Religious Instruction (SRI) and chaplaincy services in schools within that state. The organisation's website identifies that it receives active support from 11 Christian denominations, namely:

- Anglican Church

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>

- Australian Christian Churches (Assemblies of God in Australia)
- Baptist Union of Victoria
- Christian Community Churches of Victoria and Tasmania
- Christian Reformed Churches of Australia
- CRC Churches International
- Churches of Christ in Victoria and Tasmania
- Lutheran Church of Australia
- Presbyterian Church of Australia
- Salvation Army
- Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia.

Customers purchasing ACCESS ministries' materials can register to receive online resources. Therefore, there is some capacity for providing news, updates and information to volunteer instructors.

ACCESS ministries' RI materials are based on the Bible and have a stated aim of assisting students to explore and learn about the essential understandings of the Christian faith. The materials outline concepts, activities, and Bible references. A 'Scope and sequence table' at the beginning of each Trek, Search, Quest and EpiQ Teachers/Instructors Book outlines the purpose, values, Bible basics, main point, student experience, application to student and pedagogy issues for each unit and lesson. This is useful information for principals to make available to their school communities in complying with the Department's RI policy and provides parents with an accessible overview of the program.

The ACCESS ministries' RI materials comprise a number of age-based programs divided into colour-coded series which are rotated across two or three years. Two teacher manuals are provided for each colour series, intended for Semester 1 and Semester 2 of the school year.

The programs are:

- Trek - for children aged 6-8 years – comprises 3 series (Blue, Green, Yellow)
- Search - for children aged 8-10 years - comprises 3 series (Blue, Green, Yellow)
- Quest - for children aged 10-12 years - comprises 3 series (Blue, Green, Yellow)
- epiQ - an alternate program for children aged 10-12 years - comprises 2 series (Lime, Orange)
- Hub - a broader multi-age program for children aged 6-10 years
- Launch - for children aged 4-6 years. Note that Launch materials have not been considered as part of this review as they are generally targeted at an age younger than Queensland's Year 1 cohort.

All RI instructors in Queensland state schools using ACCESS ministries' materials are required to use the same colour-coded series of the programs in any given year. In 2017, Queensland RI instructors working with the ACCESS ministries' materials are required to use the Green series for Trek, Search and Quest and the Orange series of EpiQ. Queensland instructors used the Blue series in 2016, and the Yellow series in 2015. Other jurisdictions will be at different stages of the colour cycle.

Quest and epiQ are alternative materials for 10-12 year old students. ACCESS ministries describes Quest as having a more traditional learning and teaching approach, based on an inquiry framework. EpiQ uses inquiry pedagogy and assumes greater familiarity with technology.

The review found that the ACCESS ministries' materials do not provide substantial scripting for volunteer instructors to use in lessons. Instead, volunteer instructors are provided with key points and guided to "tell

the story of” or “explain the...” throughout the materials. At times, instructors are prompted to choose an example from their own experiences to discuss with students. Each lesson includes a range of activities from which instructors can choose to use in RI classes.

Further information on the ACCESS ministries’ programs is provided at **Attachment 1**.

1.4 ACCESS ministries’ Instructor training

The Council for Christian Education in Schools, trading as ACCESS ministries, recruits volunteers as religious instructors. The organisation requires that volunteers delivering the program in Victoria have prior experience working with children and validates the volunteer’s suitability to work with children. Successful candidates then proceed to ACCESS ministries’ training in relevant government policies and procedures and in understanding children, the school context, their role as volunteers and in learning and teaching. As part of their training, instructors sign an agreement that they will abide by both the relevant government departments’ and ACCESS ministries’ policies and procedures. Volunteer instructors are required to undertake an annual professional development training day in subsequent years of service. In Queensland, ACCESS ministries’ offers annual training for RI volunteers.

2 Review methodology

The review of the ACCESS ministries’ materials focused on 23⁴ Teacher/Instructor Books and accompanying student workbooks. 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

It is recognised that ACCESS ministries’ RI materials are particularly focused on Victorian schools and are not specifically developed for Queensland state schools. 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. ACCESS ministries may wish to consider including a statement to this effect in each Teacher/Instructor Book, in training materials, on websites, and in any regular communications provided to its customers.

⁴ 6 Trek, 6 Search, and 6 Quest Teacher Books (Semesters 1 and 2 for each of 3 colour-coded series); 4 EpiQ Teacher Books (Semesters 1 and 2 for each of 2 colour-coded series); 1 Hub Instructor Book

3.1.1 RI policy statement

The review did not find significant inconsistencies with the Department's RI policy statement. A few activities relating to creation of artefacts were identified that may breach Queensland RI requirements. Instructors should take appropriate precautions if including these activities in RI lessons in Queensland state schools.

Creation of artefacts

Some lessons propose making artefacts such as art works that could be used for classroom displays. To be consistent with the Department's RI policy which requires that faith group publications and materials used for RI are not accessible to other students, all displays would require removal from the classroom at the end of the RI lesson. It would be of benefit to instructors for this information to be included in the teacher books. It would also strengthen the materials' compliance with Queensland RI policy for instructors to be advised not to encourage RI students to give any materials used or created in RI classes to students who do not attend RI classes.

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.

The Department commends ACCESS ministries on including a number of reminders for volunteer instructors to be mindful of forcing their views on to students. For example:

- "Your task is to inform the students of God's nature, purposes and work, and to convey a sense of God's presence by your example and attitude. To go further and pressure young students in a 'captive audience' to commitment would contravene the rights of the students and their parents, who trust the secular school to respect their rights and faith position." (Search 2, Yellow Series, p. 23)
- Also as part of the Introduction to each Trek, Search, Quest and EpiQ Teacher/Instructor Book: "It is important to remember, however, that teachers may not insist on student participation in prayer." (e.g. Search 2, Yellow Series, p. 5)
- "As Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers, we represent a number of Christian churches under the umbrella of ACCESS ministries. We need to demonstrate respect for the beliefs and approaches of others" (Trek, 2, Green Series, p. 28)
- "...as always, you are not inviting students to take on the faith for themselves, nor are you requesting that they believe what you are teaching them" (Quest 1, Yellow Series, p. 53).

However, some examples were found of students being encouraged to recruit others. RI instructors should be reminded in the notes that students should not be encouraged to recruit other students at the school.

The 'Student Reflection' section of each session suggests a prayer that instructors "might" like to use with their class. While the introduction to each Trek, Search, Quest and EpiQ Teacher/Instructor Book includes a reminder that teachers "may not insist on student participation in prayer", ACCESS ministries could consider including a reminder about respecting students wishes in the pretext to each class prayer, in addition to the introductory note in each manual

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

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 or experiencing 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.

It is noted that the volunteer instructors delivering ACCESS ministries' programs are sometimes required to use their own examples to illustrate particular points for discussion. While this is not problematic in itself, volunteer instructors must be aware and vigilant at all times of the appropriateness and potential consequences of any examples they use in RI classes.

A very small number of lessons were identified that contained references to concepts and terms included in Bible stories that are not considered appropriate for a volunteer RI instructor to be discussing with students, e.g. rape, prostitution, mutilation.

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.

Use of animals

The Department of Education and Training is committed to the ethical treatment of animals brought into a school environment. One example was found in the ACCESS ministries' TREK program in which a "small dead fish" could be brought into an RI class - "Prepare ahead. Bring to class: A tin of sardines OR small dead fish in a plastic bag for students to open and smell" Trek 2, Green Series, p.56. There appears to be no educational benefit derived from this activity that could not be delivered through an alternative activity. It is therefore recommended that this activity not be used with Queensland school students.

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"⁶.

The ACCESS ministries' materials suggest topics for discussion in some lessons that could be considered inappropriate for an RI class. The following examples may be upsetting for students with disability or from other cultures or draw undue attention to them. Activities such as these may not be suitable for RI classes in Queensland state schools and it is preferable that they be removed or amended from future editions of the ACCESS ministries' materials:

- "Students are asked to draw a picture of a body that is not working" (Search 2, Yellow Series, p. 37)

⁶ <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/inclusive/index.html>

- “Interview the student who played Bartimaeus. Ask him what it felt like to be a blind beggar. Explain to students that a blind beggar would have been the lowest of the low in that society – helpless and useless, totally dependent on others” (Quest 2, Yellow Series, p. 12)

4 Conclusions

The review of the ACCESS ministries’ 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 Department’s 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 ACCESS ministries’ 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 Teacher/Instructor Books 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 ACCESS ministries’ materials

It is recommended that communication occurs with the Christian faith groups in Queensland that are known to use ACCESS ministries’ 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).

Attachment 1

Information about ACCESS ministries' RI programs

Trek, Search and Quest materials use a four-step teaching process for each 30-minute lesson:

- **Orientation** (open up links between the students' prior experiences and the topic of the lesson)
- **Guided discovery** (teachers lead the students to 'discover' connections between the Bible stories, their own or other's life experiences, and human issues or big life-questions)
- **Student exploration** (student activities that allow them to explore and apply the session's content and construct their own understanding)
- **Student reflection** (draws together the learning achieved).

Sessions delivered using epiQ materials also use four-step teaching process but the second and third steps (Guided Discovery and Student Exploration) are replaced with:

- **Exploration of the issue** (exploring the session's content)
- **Bible connection** (students explore the Bible story and begin to understand some of the themes).

Hub is designed for a broad multi-age context (6-10 years of age), and assumes a much higher level of active participation by the students. It assumes a non-classroom setting such as a hall, or large multi-use area, where a greater flexibility of learning activity is available (i.e. the space is not mostly taken up by tables and chairs). It also uses a four-step teaching process: Orientation, Biblical Basis, Connecting, and Exploring and Reflection.

The ACCESS ministries' RI materials are biblically based. They are written to enable students to make connections between Christian teachings and life. All sessions include a reference to the Bible or a story from the Bible.

For example, in Quest2, Blue Series, Teacher Book, p.8: *"The Bible recounts events that Christians believe happened in real places. While archaeological evidence or the existence of these places cannot confirm the truth of the accounts, they show that the places mentioned did exist and that real people lived there in real history"*.

Each lesson within the ACCESS ministries' RI materials (Teacher's Books) provides a four-step instruction process with aim to help students to discover, explore, apply and reflect on:

- an issue that the program's research has shown is of interest to many students in the target age group (i.e. respect, responsibility, inclusion, honesty, trust, doing your best, etc)
- a Bible passage
- possible application to students own lives.

The unit introduction (each unit has 3-4 sessions) provides an overview of the sessions and contains:

- the key verse from the Bible for the unit
- a brief discussion of the unit's theme and purpose
- a short statement of how each session addresses the issues or specific questions raised by the unit context.

POSTSCRIPT – AS AT AUGUST 2017:

The Queensland Department of Education and Training *Review of the ACCESS ministries Religious Instruction Materials* (2017) recommended to the publisher that there were a small number of concerns that would benefit from amendment to enhance consistency with legislation and departmental policies, procedures and frameworks.

In March 2017, ACCESS ministries advised it found the review to be fair and reasonable and committed to making relevant amendments to the RI materials.