

**Australian Parliament  
Joint Standing Committee on Migration  
Submission No. 79**

Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Migration  
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Dear Committee Chair, Ms Maria Vamvakinou,

The debate over Special Religious Instruction/Education (SRI/SRE) in government schools recently received media attention in Victoria, with a complaint lodged in the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. During 2010, the issue of running secular ethics classes in NSW during 'scripture' time also generated significant debate and opposition.

Recent research in NSW, Victoria and Queensland reveals instances of discrimination, extremist proselytising, racial vilification, and other inappropriate uses of the religious access privilege. Problems emerging from the misuse of this privilege have significant implications for Australian security and for the broader social inclusion agenda.

**The Religions, Ethics and Education Network of Australia (REENA), is calling for a comprehensive review of SRI/SRE in all Australian government schools in all states. We hope you will support this call, by extending your Multiculturalism Inquiry into state education practices.**

REENA is a working group of scholars, community practitioners, and peak body representatives working in religion and/or education in Australia. Its primary aim is to counter religious prejudice and advance respect for religious and non-religious diversity. REENA members and supporters come from a wide range of religious and non-religious ethical traditions, and from a variety of educational institutions and organisations. Please find REENA's Statement of Principles and Actions on our website: [www.reena.net.au](http://www.reena.net.au).

The most consistent finding of the 2011 Australian Human Rights Commission Report into *Freedom of religion and belief in 21st century Australia*, was the 'need for, and benefits of, education about religion... for all schools to develop awareness, familiarity, and respect for difference, from the first year to the final year of a child's education' (58). As a 'critical need', the report highlighted 'education about the religions, spiritualities and worldviews present in and affecting Australia... (as a way to) increase understanding and knowledge and, in so doing, reduce discrimination and prejudice' (80). Other Australian research in the last few decades similarly points to interreligious education as part of the remedy for countering ethnic and religious prejudice. Despite consistent calls for more inclusive religions education, Australian public schooling favours segregated, dogmatic instruction, using untrained volunteers, in a mechanism lacking accountability and open to abuse.

**We hope that your inquiry into multiculturalism proceeds to further investigate this matter, as it requires a federal imprimatur.** Some REENA members, seeking to discover more about the practices of SRI/SRE have made Freedom of Information applications, only to have them rejected, without cause, by State Education Departments.

If you require more information on REENA, or our aims, please contact me. I look forward to reading the outcomes of your inquiry.

Sincerely, Cathy Byrne, (for REENA)