

Date

Teach, not preach.

Secular Education Network (NZ)

Dear Chairperson, Principal, and Board of Trustees

I am writing to ask that the Board of Trustees reviews the religious instruction programme at your school. In New Zealand, up to a week a year of teaching time is consumed by single faith, Christianity religious instruction, which is provided by church volunteers with no professional teaching qualifications.

As you will be aware, if the school is running religious instruction then the school or class must be legally closed by the Board of Trustees under the Education Act, and parents must sign a consent form for their children to attend the lessons.

An increasing number of state schools have voluntarily ceased their religious instruction. Our latest survey demonstrates that under 30% of primary and intermediate schools now provide the classes. Despite this, we are contacted frequently by parents upset at the 'lessons' their children have been learning.

The Secular Education Network considers that religious instruction is discriminatory.

Choosing a single faith for promotion at school lends the authority of the school, and school culture, towards supporting one religious group. This creates a less friendly school culture for non-adherents to that religion, as well as temporarily stopping their access to education.

Religious instruction leaders claim they are simply instilling values in children. Our evidence is to the contrary. Parents often report that their children are bullied for not believing, or feel left out because of the lollies, stickers and games that the other children get to encourage attendance. This upsets the child and further pressures the parents to let them attend.

Our website provides an excellent source of information and resources. I have enclosed a list of questions to consider when you next review your religious instruction programme. Please don't hesitate to contact us for further resources and support.

Yours sincerely

Secular Education Network

christchurch@sen.org.nz

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Secular Education Network?

The Secular Education Network (SEN) was started by the New Zealand Association of Rationalists and Humanists in 2012 in response to increasing complaints from parents about religious instruction. We exist to help families adversely affected by religious instruction, as well as to work towards removing religious discrimination in schools. We attempt to counter misinformation and address the lack of information around religious instruction.

We are a varied group of parents, grandparents, teachers and concerned citizens. We have supporters who are non-religious, and those who identify with minority religions, as well as Christians who do not support imposing their religion on others.

We support neutral religious education by trained teachers, for example within history or social studies, or as a separate subject at high school. What we object to is single faith religious instruction (akin to Sunday School teaching) within our secular state schools.

How can I find the results of the school survey?

Between 2017 and 2019 we surveyed all 1788 of New Zealand's primary and intermediate schools. We found that 535 schools are still inviting volunteer Church members in to instruct children in Christianity. As another 205 failed to respond, the actual number will be higher. The remaining 1048 schools do not have religious instruction.

Families wanting to know whether their school has religious instruction can search at www.TeachNotPreach.org.nz.

Is religious instruction allowed in a state school?

Yes, if the school or classes within the school are officially 'closed'. Schools or classes can be deemed to be closed by the Board of Trustees for up to an hour a week, 20 weeks a year, for religious instruction.

It can be helpful to know how this came about. When the Education Act was created in 1877, it made primary education compulsory, free and secular. Secular means 'non-religious' or having no stance on religious faith. At this time, around 90% of New Zealanders considered themselves to be Christian, compared to 37% today. Primary schools became secular so that different Christian denominations didn't fight over who would have access to this newly-compulsory education system.

Until the Education Act was amended in 1964, there was a huge amount of debate about teaching religion in schools and much of it was done using a loophole called the Nelson system where the school was considered 'closed' to allow the classes to take place. In 1964, this was included into the Education Act to make the classes legal. However, the school still had to 'close' to allow the religious instruction classes, as the school or class must be secular when open.

The Education and Training Act 2020 changed this. It specifies that religious instruction must be held on an opt-in basis by requiring signed consent from a parent or caregiver before allowing a student to participate in religious instruction.

Does the Ministry of Education approve the classes?

No. The Ministry has no input into the syllabuses taught, because the school is technically 'closed' when they take place. There are no official guidelines for the content of religious instruction classes, and schools may run the programme as they see fit.

Where can we get more information?

Our website TeachNotPreach.org.nz is a great source of information. You can also join the Teach, not Preach, Secular Education Network [Facebook group](#), where you can ask plenty of questions.

Religious instruction questions to consider

Often, religious instruction or Bible in School classes continue simply because they've always been there. Successive board members have approved them without giving any real consideration to whether they are still appropriate in our increasingly diverse society.

Here are a few questions to consider as you review religious instruction at your school.

1. What value does Bible in Schools give to our school?

- Tradition aside, what benefit does bible in schools this provide to our school community?

2. Is there potential for parents and/or children at our school to experience religious discrimination because of Bible in Schools?

- Is there the potential for Bible in Schools to cause a division in the school community?
- Could some parents feel uncomfortable talking with the school about their concerns about Bible in Schools? If so, why?
- Could having Bible in Schools place an additional burden on families already struggling fit in with differently-abled children? It has been noticed by SEN that children on the autistic spectrum are less likely to cope well with Bible in Schools present.
- Is it feasible to talk with older children about how they feel when they are made to leave their classroom because their parents don't want them to participate or they don't wish to participate?

3. Does the Board feel adequately informed to comment on the value Bible in Schools may offer to the school?

- Have Trustees sat in on sessions?
- Do they understand what the legislation allowing religious instruction requires and are they familiar with the MoE guidelines?
- Have Trustees read the "teacher's manuals"?

4. Are parents currently adequately informed to be able to decide whether or not they support their children to attend Bible in Schools?

- Have they been given the teacher's manuals?
- Are they encouraged/invited to sit in on a session?
- Do parents know that what is taught is not endorsed by the school or part of the school curriculum?
- Do parents know the volunteers are not trained teachers?
- Do parents understand that public primary schools by law are secular and legally must close classes to provide Bible in Schools?
- Do parents understand their rights to be free from discrimination under the Bill of Rights?

5. For families who support Bible in Schools, what value does this weekly 30- minute session provide them that they couldn't access within their own homes, communities and churches?

- Tradition aside, why does our school feel like it should offer religious instruction and close the school or class, rather than simply leave families to practice their own religions outside of school time?

6. School values usually include inclusivity and treating people with different cultures and religious beliefs as equals. Is closing the school to provide religious instruction for one faith in conflict with these values?

- What message does the provision of Bible in Schools give to new enrolments about the values of our school and its attitude towards inclusivity? Does it assume that Christianity is considered aspirational for everyone in the school, and if so, is that fair?

- Looking into the future with a growing and changing roll and demographic, is Bible in Schools going to reflect the needs and values of the school community?
- Should there ever be one family put off starting at our school because of our religious stance as a public school?