

Religious Schools Under Threat

The Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) recently released its first consultation paper for its Review into Religious Educational Institutions and Anti-Discrimination Laws. While the paper formally notes the importance of religious freedom and parental rights, it proceeds to recommend severe restrictions of those rights. The proposed reforms effectively:



Strip religious schools of the right to give preference, in good faith, to staff who share their religious ethos.



Restrict the ability for religious schools to require staff to model their religious beliefs in the area of gender and sexuality, even where the employee's role involves religious teaching.



Restrict the ability for religious schools, on behalf of parents, to address student behaviour in the area of gender and sexuality, including where their behaviour would undermine the school's religious ethos.

The ALRC has released a survey for the wider public. **Please take the time to fill this out and make your concerns heard.** The ALRC needs to hear from a wide range of community members about the importance of religious schools being able to educate students in a holistic faith environment.

Schools are about more than just teaching maths and English – they are a learning community that shapes the whole person for life. Parents choose faith-based schools because they provide a community of faith. The proposed reforms from the ALRC threaten to demolish the ability of faith-based schools to teach and operate in accordance with their ethos, which is an attack on the right of parents to raise their children according to their religious and moral convictions.

Have your voice heard by filling out the ALRC survey at alrc.gov.au/inquiry/anti-discrimination-laws/-submission/survey or scan the QR code below. You might like to consider the comments on the next page in your response to some of the questions. The survey must be completed by the 24th February.



Have your say. Scan the QR code:



Why did you choose to be involved with a religious educational institution?

If it was because of the Christian values, character or beliefs of the school, please ensure that this is captured. For those who are teachers, it may be because you sought an opportunity to teach according to your faith, and to model/live out your faith in your workplace.

What do you see as the good things about religious educational institutions that you have been involved with?

Hopefully there will be many good things you can identify! Parents often recognise the school's values as well as the caring culture and environment it provides for students from many varying backgrounds, along with the positive examples of staff and the relationships within the school community.

Do you see the creation of a 'community of faith' within a religious educational institution as important?

Schools are about more than just teaching maths and English – they are a learning community that shapes the whole person. That's why schools teach sport, art and ethics. Parents of all differing faith backgrounds and none choose faith-based schools because they want their child's learning community to be a loving community that nurtures and shapes their child. That community only develops from the genuine faith of the Christians who are employed by the school and who willingly model its ethos. In your answer, you might talk about how you have experienced the community of faith in your school or college, and how you value that as a part of education, and how Christian teachers and other staff provide a positive Christian role model.

What do you think about reforms to change the law so that religious educational institutions would not be allowed to discriminate against students on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, marital or relationship status, or pregnancy?

All schools set down codes of conduct for students that reflect the values of the school and the community it serves. No student should be harassed or bullied for any reason. However, all schools should be able to have rules of conduct that reflect and uphold the faith of the community. It is unreasonable for the government to prevent schools from teaching and operating in accordance with their religious beliefs and values. It is unreasonable for schools to be required to allow active opposition to their beliefs, or to consent to campaigns to abandon their beliefs. In your answer, you might suggest that schools should and do treat all children with respect and love, and that it is reasonable for a school to have rules of behaviour in line with their faith and to place limits on behaviour that would seek to undermine their religious ethos.

What do you think about reforms to change the law so that religious educational institutions would not be allowed to discriminate against staff on the grounds of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital or relationship status or pregnancy?

Schools that are faith communities need to have staff who uphold their faith. Faith is a fundamental worldview that impacts all of life for a believer. For many faiths, this impact includes matters such as sexuality and gender identity. Staff who work in faith-based schools and colleges should expect to be asked to share the values of their faith community, not only in their teaching but also in the modelling of their faith. In your answer, you might discuss the value of having staff that uphold the faith in creating the faith community in a school or college. For faiths that hold to specific beliefs about matters such as sexuality or gender identity, those beliefs cannot be separated from the rest of the faith at the direction of a government.

In relation to the employment of staff and selection of contractors:

- Are there some factors that institutions should be permitted to take into account for particular employee/contractor roles, but not for other employee/contractor roles?
- What do you think religious educational institutions should be permitted to take into account in preferencing members of the same religion?
- What do you think religious educational institutions should not be permitted to take into account in preferencing members of the same religion?

Each faith has its own requirements – some have restrictions on clothing, diet, and all kinds of behaviour. It is not appropriate – an indeed dangerous overreach – for a Government to decide which bits of a faith a religious school is allowed to require, and which bits are not. In your answer, you might talk about the need for religious groups to hold to their own faith and not be told what they are and are not allowed to believe.