

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

**Q: Which legislation covers the issue of religious instruction in New Zealand's state primary schools?**

**A:** The Education Act 1964, Sections 77-79.

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Section 81 of the Education Act states that *"Nothing in this Act shall affect religious instruction or religious observances in schools other than State primary schools."*

Accordingly the advice contained in this leaflet applies only to the legal situation in New Zealand's State Primary Schools.

Throughout this leaflet **"Religious Instruction"** will be referred to by the abbreviation **"RI"**. **"The Act"** refers to the **Education Act 1964**. **"School"** refers to a **State Primary School**.

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**Q: Must a School include RI as part of its curriculum?**

**A:** NO. Section 78 of the Act empowers School Boards to decide whether or not RI should be a part of School life.

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**Q: Must School Boards notify parents that RI will take place in the School?**

**A:** The Act does not oblige School Boards to consult or liaise with parents on the question of RI. However, some Schools do circulate newsletters or questionnaires to survey parents' views on RI.

**Q: Must RI take place during or outside normal School hours?**

**A:** Section 78 of the Act states that a School may be closed for up to thirty (30) minutes per week to allow an instructor approved by the School Board to provide children with religious instruction.

In practice such RI sessions generally take place during normal School hours. However, during this thirty-minute period the School is deemed officially "closed" in the eyes of the law. This is known informally as the "Nelson System", named after the New Zealand city where the system was first introduced.

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**Q: Who may teach RI?**

**A:** Any volunteer approved by the School Board. In practice RI is usually carried out by volunteers from the **Churches Education Commission** ([www.cec.org.nz](http://www.cec.org.nz)). This is known informally as the "Bible in Schools" programme.

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**Q: Must my child attend RI sessions?**

**A:** NO. Section 79 of the Act states that attendance at RI is not compulsory.

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**Q: I do not wish my child to have to attend RI sessions. What should I do?**

**A:** Section 79 of the Act requires that parents or guardians not wishing their children to attend RI sessions must make their wishes known in the form of a letter to the School Principal.

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**Q: I have written to the Principal of my child's school asking that my child be excused from attending RI. What will now happen to my child during RI sessions?**

**A:** The Act does not make specific provision for children not attending RI sessions. It is the responsibility of your School Board to ensure that alternative arrangements are made for the supervision of your child during RI sessions. Many schools make use of the school library for this purpose.

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**Q: May RI sessions be held more often than once a week? May RI sessions run longer than thirty minutes?**

**A:** Not in ordinary circumstances. Section 78(a) of the Act states that a School may extend RI beyond a weekly, half-hour session only by special leave of the Minister of Education.

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**Q: May any other form of religious instruction take place during School hours?**

**A:** NO. Section 77 of the Act states that all other teaching in Schools shall be "entirely of a secular character."

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**Q: I am concerned about the quality or content of material being presented to my child during RI sessions. What can I do?**

**A:** Write to your School Board to express your concerns. Write to the Minister of Education. Our Association would be pleased to hear from you.

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**Q: What is the position of the NZ Association of Rationalists & Humanists on RI?**

**A:** Ideally we would prefer that the current system be replaced by a programme of teaching philosophy in schools. This would provide children with the skills in critical thinking to make up their own minds. Our next preference would be for a broad programme of “systems of belief” instruction to be undertaken, which includes all major beliefs, whether they be religious or non-religious.

Within the context of the present system, it is the position of our Association that the Act should be amended to allow parents to “opt in” not “opt out” from RI. The current legal situation requires children to be withdrawn from the classroom. This may lead to a child feeling uncomfortable or out-of-place with his or her peers.

The NZARH also believes that Schools have a moral duty to:

- Liaise with parents over the question of RI.
- Monitor the quality and content of what is taught during RI sessions.
- Ensure that appropriate arrangements are made for the supervision and welfare of children not attending RI.

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*The information in this leaflet was correct at the date of publication (January 2005)*

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This is a publication of the:

**N.Z. ASSOCIATION OF  
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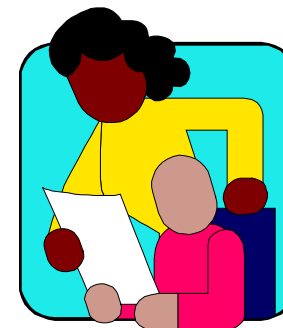
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# RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN NEW ZEALAND'S STATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS



## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

### A brief guide for parents and schoolteachers

Issued by the  
NZ Association of  
Rationalists & Humanists

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