

**Speech by Yair Miller at Special Religious Education Celebration of Interchurch
Commission on Special Religious Education – September 21 2010**

Minister for Education and Training, the Honourable Verity Firth MP

His Eminance George Cardinal Pell

Mr Khaled Sukkarieh, Chairman, Islamic Council of NSW

Mr Richard Quadrio, Chairperson of the NSW Council of Churches

Ms Ann Maree Whenman, Chair, Interchurch Commission on Special Religious Education

All heads and representatives of other faith groups

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Can I begin by firstly acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we sit and their elders past and present.

It gives me great pleasure to stand before you this evening at this important celebration of Special Religious Education in our schools.

Rather than reinforce the importance of SRE as a vehicle for fostering cultural diversity in NSW or make general statements about the benefits of a multicultural society, - issues that we are all aware of and fully appreciate - I want to share with you the Jewish community's distinct appreciation for Special Religious Education.

The Jewish Community in NSW is extremely proud to have been involved with SRE since it was first offered here in NSW over 130 years ago.

Jewish Education, *Chinuch* in Hebrew, is one of the foundations on which our people have rested for millennia and we find its earliest mention in the *Torah*, The Bible.

Religious Education is one of the primary responsibilities placed on a Jewish Parent – and on a Jewish Community.

In the seminal Jewish Prayer, *The Shema*, found in Deuteronomy Chapter 6 we read 3 times daily the following proclamation: *“Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and your gates.”*

For the Jewish community of NSW, SRE is much more than religious instruction for Jewish children who study outside of the Jewish Day School Education System. It is a crucial component of forging the Jewish identity of such students and laying the foundations for a lifelong connection to their heritage, faith and community. SRE results in untold benefits for Jewish school children as individuals, and to our community as a whole.

Let us look at the individual level. SRE offers Jewish school children an opportunity to meet educators and religious leaders from their community, learn about the theory and practice of Judaism in a fun environment with their school friends, and it allows them to interact and identify with their fellow Jewish students.

Being part of a religious community provides answers to such questions as:

Who am I?

Where do I come from?

Who are my ancestors?

Some teenagers and young adults go through periods of soul-searching and question the beliefs passed down to them by their families and community elders. This is not unique to

the Jewish community. This is a natural part of becoming an adult and a phenomenon likely faced by all religious communities. Some teenagers explore other religious options whilst others reject traditional religion altogether. But as communal leaders, we are charged with providing children with a solid grounding in their religious heritage and we have confidence that this provides them with a life-long sense of cultural identity and a connection to something greater than themselves and their immediate family regardless of how their religious beliefs might otherwise change.

The core and unique responsibility of delivery of Jewish SRE in NSW falls to the New South Wales Board of Jewish Education, which operates as Academy BJE. I acknowledge their principal, Ms Rochelle Schonberger who is with us this evening. Academy BJE provides SRE lessons in over 70 schools throughout New South Wales. The majority of these schools are in the Sydney metropolitan area, but they also provide lessons in some outer metropolitan and country schools.

Students are encouraged to feel positive about being Jewish and to identify with the Jewish community. They learn about Jewish holidays, Jewish values, basic practices in the synagogue, and are offered an understanding of the Jewish People's unique connection to the land and people of Israel. Older children also explore the ethical aspects of Judaism and explore areas of Jewish history. Basic Jewish prayers are incorporated into each lesson. Where possible, lessons are also enriched with activities such as demonstration Sedarim for Pesach (Passover), hands-on experiences, craft activities, guest presenters and visits from Jewish youth groups.

Compulsory schooling has been a part of Jewish Heritage from as early as 75BCE.

In recent years, pedagogues have acknowledged that the methods of instruction in Ancient Israel indirectly anticipated many of the tenets of modern education. The importance of education is repeatedly stressed in the *Talmud, the sacred Jewish Oral Tradition*: children are to start school at the age of six – which is in accordance with present-day requirements throughout the world; they are not to be beaten with a stick or cane, but should receive

only mild punishment; older students should help out in the education of those who are younger; and children should not be kept away from their lessons by other duties. The number of pupils in a class should not exceed 25; larger classes require the engagement of a relief teacher while two teachers have to be appointed if there are over 40 pupils.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk also known as the *Meshech Chochma*, a prominent religious leader in Eastern Europe in the early 20th century, observes that God's statement "[Abraham is blessed because] he will instruct his children and his house after him to follow in God's ways to perform righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18:19) is an implicit *mitzvah*, commandment, to teach Judaism.

We in NSW are indeed fortunate to have a system such as SRE available to religious groups.

Jews have experienced times in history when they were either denied the right to teach their children about Judaism such as under the Roman's and the Nazi's and times when they were denied access, or had restricted access to the mainstream educational system such as in early Nazi Germany and throughout the former Soviet Union.

We are blessed in Australia because we have both the right to teach our children and access and ability to do so. SRE is an important vehicle for the access and ability to be able to discharge our sacred duty - the duty of educating the next generation.

Thank you.