

Education: The Bible belongs in schools

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New Zealand school classrooms are an underutilised mission field, according to Christian Education Services national director David Mulholland.

"Churches by and large have not woken up to the fact that this is a mission field on our doorstep," says David. "The children are right there and we don't have to supply buildings, seating, lighting or heating. It's an opportunity we should grab hold of."

Every week more than 3800 volunteers teach Bible in Schools, as it has been known for decades, to more than 90,000 primary and intermediate children in 771 schools around the country.

While that is an impressive figure, David is concerned the actual number of schools opting out of religious education classes has been increasing in recent years.

"Sometimes it's a pressure on time," he says, "they say they can't afford the half hour. But as New Zealand becomes more secular it's not always PC to have a Christian education programme."

For more than 100 years, CEC has partnered with churches to provide Christian education in New Zealand state schools. It is one of the largest volunteer organisations in the country. Around 16 denominations support CEC and deliver weekly Bible in Schools programmes.

Baptists are at the top of the support graph, supplying more than 200 volunteers each week. (The next closest single denomination is the Presbyterian Church with around 80 volunteers.)

"One of the strengths is that we aren't representing just one church but we are representing all those churches," David says.

CEC is now entering a new phase. The national office will shift from Wellington to Auckland by the end of the year to streamline the CEC structure.

"We often hear in church about the 10-40 window for evangelising people in the world. For me it's a 9 to 3 window," says David. "There's a huge number of children in our country who have no knowledge of things Christian. The only time they hear God or Jesus mentioned is as a swear word."

"Before a person can make a valid decision on anything they need to know about it. Bible in Schools is invaluable in terms of helping children understand about Jesus and Christian faith."

He says CEC aims to connect the next generation with essential biblical values to help them make good life choices, which will in turn positively impact their families, schools and communities.

A recent pilot study into CEC's relevance in today's society showed positive feedback from participating principals who appreciated the community involvement in their schools from BIS volunteers.

"Schools are encouraged to teach values and Bible in Schools is a tool that can provide part of that value programme," explains David.

CEC is awaiting funding to carry out a larger study.

David would like to see a reverse in the trend of declining school participation.

"New Zealand's cultural heritage is founded on the Christian faith, and we believe the teachings of Jesus continue to be relevant to children and families around the country," he says. "I don't think we can ever quantify the value of Bible in Schools and the seeds it sows."

David says CEC priorities include improving the services offered to schools and increasing the support from churches and Christians by improving connections with the Christian community. Finding volunteers to teach is becoming more difficult.

"These days both mum and dad work therefore they don't have the time to volunteer, and we need volunteers who are committed to training and being upskilled so we offer professionalism in the classroom," David says.

While David would love more people to volunteer to teach Bible in Schools, he would also like people to pray consistently for those involved in delivering the weekly programme.

He says another challenge is getting school boards to see the value of having CRE classes in their school, as the trustees make the decision as to whether or not to allow in Bible in School teachers in.

"If there were more Christians on school boards they could have more influence over having CRE in a school," he says.

Securing adequate funding is another important issue for resourcing both national and regional CEC work.

David has been involved with the Churches Education Commission in a number of capacities. During the 1980s he was the first fulltime Christian Education Services advisor.

Later, as a professor lecturing for the Bible College of New Zealand, he was the college's representative to CEC national meetings and trained CRE volunteers. He returned to CEC fulltime in 2008 and was appointed national director last July.