

## Shine Shenanigans

To whom it may concern:

The following account is of mine and my eldest child's experience so far with the "Shine" programme as it is facilitated through my children's state school. I have six children and the experience I recount below was that only of my eldest. With five more children negotiating, or yet to negotiate, Queensland's public school system, which until recently I had supposed to be secular, I have a manifest duty to them to air my concerns where ever I can find a willing audience or platform.

I will state at the outset that I do not impose any belief systems on my children; rather, anything and everything is open for debate around our crowded dining table. Enquiring and sceptical thinking is encouraged in our house; indeed, this is how my concerns about "Shine" first emerged. Four of my six children lost their mother to cancer at an early age, and yet I doubt a better combination of well-adjusted, happy and intelligent children exists. This, for my new wife and I, is practical evidence that our parenting approach is on the right track. Indeed, such an approach, teaching young people to *think*, not what to *believe*, should be the *only mission* of our Queensland state school system.

This was indeed the view of government back in 1875, when the Education Act insisted that *only* secular education be taught in public schools. But the Act was amended via a referendum in 1910, and all references to the word "secular" were expunged. Students today are thus fair game for the evangelisers and proselytisers who are allowed to enter our schools under the auspices of Religious Instruction, the NSCP chaplaincy scheme, and the new activity of Christian mentors organised by groups such as World Vision and assorted local evangelical churches—all too frequently aided and abetted by like-minded principals and staff.

This epistle then, is fired by outrage that we are forced to contend with and mediate State-sanctioned religious infiltration. As is the case with "Shine", where ideological content is *not disclosed* to parents and students either when the permission slip to attend comes home, or when I have sought to gain further knowledge of the programme. Similarly, ideological content in the chaplaincy programme, organised by Scripture Union, a self-confessed evangelical organisation designed specifically to recruit school children to Jesus, is officially *denied*. Opting-out of these programmes is thus, in the first instance, inhibited by their *apparently* disinterested motives, and in the second instance by dearth of a suitable option for those stragglers who are not taken in. Like Religious Instruction in primary schools, and unlike programmes such as instrumental music, "Shine" is not properly extra-curricular or optional; it *takes the place* of educational routines and in many schools is offered by Education Queensland as an option to compulsory sport, thereby undermining attempts to introduce young people, and their parents, to the need for regular exercise.

This is both a letter of outrage, then, and a desperate plea that we reprise the enlightened thinking of 1875, and make Queensland State Schools *genuinely* secular, as the real 'education revolution' of the late nineteenth century provided Queensland with at the outset of our public education system. Our multi-cultural and multi-faith, and increasingly non-faith, society

demands this if we are to be motivated by reason and represented by impartial government.

An innocuous enough looking form came home some months ago for parents to sign, offering a programme for girls designed to build confidence and self-esteem—"Shine". There was no mention of any specific religious or ideological content, so we signed our daughter on, though I was dubious about the apparent emphasis on the body that the programme seemed intent on. Body image is probably the most important issue for young girls (and boys) to come to terms with in a culture obsessed with it, and there is a wealth of information pointing out the damage caused when girls are directed down the path of 'looking beautiful' to comply with the more distorted images our economic system requires to keep it motoring along.

My daughter talked all about "Shine" after the first session. Each one of us is unique, special and here for a reason, she was told. An assortment of other special things were also discussed, amongst which were time, mobile phones (because they keep us in touch with friends. But my children do not have phones, so this upset my daughter) and wedding rings. Several married women present elaborated in turn on just how special the latter item was. "Time" was special because no one knew how much they had; "only God knows that", the girls were told. The girls were also entertained with the song, *and lyrics*, of "Mirror", my daughter told me. My wife and I eyed each other knowingly across the table; the song is a Christian fundamentalist dirge available via various impassioned performances on the Internet.

After this, each Monday "Shine" became the topic of discussion as we were forced, according to *our* lights, to help our children deconstruct, understand and then question the messages received at school. There is not room here for a verbatim account, of course, suffice it to say that over the next few weeks it became clear that the girls were being urged to adopt the kind of passive/conservative Christian stereotypes that we are all long familiar with: they were being groomed for domestic and spiritual bliss as demure brides of Man and Christ.

This went against the spirit of self-reliance, curiosity, empowerment and equality that we encourage in our house for girls as well as boys (we have three of each). On Monday evenings, now, we regularly find ourselves openly contradicting what was being taught at school. Exasperated, I phoned the school and politely asked for a copy of the form I'd originally signed, to see what it said about content. The receptionist asked if I wanted to discuss the matter with the "Shine" presenter. I said 'no' and that I just wanted the form for now. Within half an hour I was phoned first at home then at work (by two different teachers, it transpired) by the "Shine" presenter, who, somewhat alarmingly, is also my daughter's teacher, and was rudely questioned about the nature of my enquiry. I responded that I'd merely asked for the form, but under persistent questioning I confessed that I was indeed very concerned from my daughter's accounts about the non-secular nature of the programme. I asked again for the form, as well as any other documentation on the programme. I have subsequently received the form but nothing else.

That evening, it emerged that my daughter had also been questioned as to *my* motives, and invited to withdraw from the "Shine" programme. She said 'no', as she didn't want to be separated from the entire female contingent of the class. It is curious how the content seems calculated to seduce any and all young girls. It also transpired that my daughter had been privy to the commotion my *private* phone call had caused. All three grade seven classes, interconnected,

were left in limbo as the matter was frantically discussed, phone calls were made and my daughter and I were questioned. One wonders at the eagerness to eject my daughter, an extremely quiet and sensitive child, when the agenda is disinterested benevolence?

This outrageous invasion of my privacy was also a source of embarrassment, bordering on harassment, for my daughter. As for myself, I now visit the school knowing that my whole family is probably the subject of gossip amongst at least some of the patently evangelical school staff, public servants all, who should be able to divorce their personal beliefs and values from their role as educators, in what clearly needs to be a secular school system. The obvious question is, if the “Shine” presenters are doing nothing untoward, why are they so secretive and ludicrously, and offensively, defensive?

To my great relief, my daughter opted not to go to the "Fleuro" night recently, where the little princesses get to really shine, but the next day her *gobsmacked* best friend exclaimed to my daughter that she was right and that "they're all Christians". It seems the entertainment there included spirited accounts of how various attendees had found God and been saved. And all this in a State School in the modern West, where centuries ago leading lights, in much more Christian cultures than our own, wisely decided on strict separation of church and state, and on secular education.

Queensland in particular, so I've learned, dispensed with secular schooling one hundred years ago. Before a 1910 referendum, Queensland State Schools were unambiguously secular, and at a time when religion was comparatively monolithic and moderate in nature. Modern Australian society bears no comparison in its diversity of cultures, faiths and non-faiths, and yet our schools are allowing extremist Christians in at the back door.

It is patently obvious, to me, that the “Shine” programme is an insidious and concerted, but thinly veiled, attempt by evangelical fundamentalists to ‘get at’ our children. Indeed, since my interest was fired, I have found various damning evidence that makes this an incontestable and indefensible conclusion. Via the ostensibly disinterested NSCP chaplaincy and “Shine” programmes, and who knows what else, Australia's state schools are prey to the covert proselytising and machination's of zealots. This is a sober assessment and an accurate account of my family's experience- indeed, there is much more I might say on the subject.

On my family's behalf, I *demand* that my children's education be secular. My wife and I should not have to monitor and contradict sectarian ideology foisted on our children at school. Wiser heads, prior to 1910, insisted explicitly that secular education *only* be taught in State Schools; this is on the public record. With many years of overseeing my children's education still to come, am I to expect plenty more of this kind of opportunistic exploitation of a breach that the "Shine" programme exemplifies? I fear so, and worse, since I now understand that Education Queensland and the Queensland Studies Authority both condone, at least by not condemning it, the practice of individual teachers using the unscientific Intelligent Design (ID) and Creationism models as an integral part of Science teaching across Queensland.

There must be serious and concerted efforts to restore secular education to our public system of education. Whatever people's private religious beliefs, or non-beliefs, may be, they should be left

at the school gate, where the sign must read “Beware of the Dogma”. The susceptible innocence of children should be protected from all vested interests at school, and education rehabilitated, once again, to the strict pursuit of genuine education and learning.

I have not mentioned names, or schools, but I would be happy to disclose these as occasion demands, and stand by my account if someone in authority will stand up and address this momentous issue.

Sincerely etc.

*The name and address of the author, and the name and location of the Qld state school involved are known to the Australian Secular Lobby but are withheld in this public display of this parental account in deference to his children’s interests. The ASL, unlike Education Queensland, has the interests of children to the fore.*