

Christian School Concerns About Chilling Effect on Free Speech of *Criminal Code Amendment (Hate Crimes) Bill 2024*

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The Australian Association of Christian Schools (AACS) has urgently written to the Attorney General to express their concerns about the government's *Criminal Code Amendment (Hate Crimes) Bill 2024* in relation to its potential impact on free speech and religious expression.

While the AACS fully supports efforts to combat violence and harm rooted in hate, it warns that expanding the Bill's protections to include attributes like "sex" and "gender identity" could lead to unintended consequences for faith communities.

"Christian schools support faith leaders calling for amendments to the Bill to ensure that laws designed to combat 'hate' and 'violence' focus on physical harm and does not include psychological harm to a person's mental health."

"As Christians, we believe all people are made in the image of God and are called to love, not hate," said Vanessa Cheng, Executive Officer of AACS, "however, there is a real risk that the broad definitions and expanded list of attributes could criminalise religious teachings on sex or gender which could be considered 'hateful' or 'harmful' by some people."

"We are concerned the law could be weaponised and lead to a chilling effect on free speech and undermine the ability of churches and faith-based schools to teach and promote their deeply held beliefs," said Ms Cheng.

AACS urges the government to ensure the Bill protects vulnerable groups without infringing upon the fundamental right to freedom of conscience and belief.

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