As we have seen, notions of secularism vary. Similarly, different nations’
education systems may have nuanced ideas about religious or ideological
neutrality, inclusiveness, equity, professionalism and accountability.
Although nation-specific contexts do need to be considered, some prin-
ciples might retain their essential nature and integrity despite shifting senti-
ment and circumstances. Chapter 2 outlined how the secular principle, in
education, defines a space in which curriculum and teacher training is
designed, developed and delivered by the state, under policies which aim
to be actively inclusive, deliberatively democratic and consciously critical.
The secular principle can thus be used as a reliable compass for state
education as it navigates the emerging currents for religion in public life
and policy.

One of the duties of progressive education is *educare* (Latin – ‘to lead
out’); that is, to look outwardly, to seek and unearth latent potential, to
challenge through comparing with and competing against others. Questions
about how one education system rates against others can be beneficial in
unearthing standards, and can help to chart a course through changing
times. Along these lines, governments like to benchmark. Rankings of edu-
cation budgets and student performances are the focus of heated public
discussion, occasioning national pride and, at times, confounded indigna-
tion: Did we slip this year compared to China? Are we spending more per
student? What makes the difference—teachers or testing? Why does
Scandinavia always top the charts? Comparison raises important questions
about how things are done and how they might be done differently.
Comparison entails both an outward and inward exploration: What is
everybody else doing and is it working? What are we doing and can we do
it better?

Modern plural democracies have developed different ways of managing
religion in schools during the past half-century. In some nations, debate
about religion in public schools is part of open, reasoned public discussion;
in others, the issues, and even the discourse, seems strangely pushed to
the fringes. The instrumental argument for including secular religions and
ethics in public schooling implies that societies which do so are better
off—that there will be some pay-off in their social development. But this implication is not necessarily widely accepted. This chapter provides a snapshot of the legal and curriculum approaches for religious instruction (RI), religions education (RE) and secular religions and ethics (secular R&E) (as summarised in Chapter 1) in the public education systems of ten highly developed western nations. Through comparison, elements of best practice may emerge. The ten most developed western nations, according to the 2011 United Nations Human Development Index, were: Sweden, Norway, Liechtenstein, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States of America, Canada, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand.  

Twenty-eighth-ranked England is used in this analysis (instead of 8th ranked Liechtenstein) because England has had a significant influence in the development of and research into approaches to RE since Ninian Smart’s work in the 1960s. This influence continues through the work of Robert Jackson and the Warwick University Religions and Education Research Unit.

The analysis here is a spotlighting exercise, viewing alternative positions and possibilities. It provides a starting place for exploring RI, RE and secular R&E models in the western developed world. The comparison focuses on ‘state’ schools, sometimes referred to as ‘public’ schools—though these terms are often not equivalent. The chapter includes, where pertinent, brief analyses of national demographics and media comment. The review is not a comprehensive analysis of similar systems, nor an assessment of causal connection between secular R&E and social wellbeing or stability.

**Comparison Overview**

Models of RI, RE and R&E, and situations in the ten developed nations mentioned above, are changing. Although Christian privileging persists, the emerging trend is towards a secular study of religious and ethical systems (secular R&E). Some of the developed nations take a progressive liberal (multicultural) or critical (intercultural) approach, with secular R&E

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