

**1. Your submission indicates that you are generally happy with the current SEE program and curriculum. However, are there any improvements at all that you would like to see made?**

Our written submission does not express any view on the SEE program or curriculum but does indicate that we are happy that legislation now allows children across NSW access to meaningful learning during the time period allotted for SRE. We look forward to more NSW schools offering ethics classes in Years 5&6, and as the curriculum is approved, extending ethics classes to Years 3&4, as well as K-2.

Our submission also states that we welcome the current critique of the ethics program implementation and curriculum. Any educational program can only benefit from regular and frequent review. We are concerned about the premature inquiry into SEE (as it has only been operating since the beginning of 2011) and the selective nature of the critique. This same scrutiny should extend to the curricula of the various SRE groups.

***We suggest that the Committee recommend an extensive review of both SRE and SEE, once SEE has been fully implemented across all class years.***

#### *Ethics Class Implementation*

We are pleased with Primary Ethics' implementation of the program. The quality of program implementation is remarkable given the little time and few resources they have had to mount this.

One of the founding parents' ethics volunteers is an ethics class coordinator who has had the opportunity to observe some ethics classes for year 5/6 children at her school (classes for younger children are not yet offered). She has found that the children's engagement with discussion depends heavily on class sizes. When class sizes reach the maximum set by Primary Ethics (i.e. 22) student engagement can be challenging. With smaller classes this is not an issue.

***We suggest that the Committee review maximum class sizes for both SEE and SRE.***

#### *Awareness of ethics classes as an option*

Many parents are confused about the process of opting out of SRE, before being 'allowed' the option of ethics classes for their child. Parents have indicated to us that they are frustrated by the fact that they are not presented with all available options, and thus cannot make their choice on an informed basis.

***We recommend that SEE should be offered alongside SRE and not only to children who opt out.***

### *Children who opt out of SRE and SEE*

We note that at the recent hearings concern has been expressed about the fact that the children in “non-scripture” are still denied meaningful learning. In our view, non-scripture would no longer be a necessary option if SRE and SEE were offered alongside each other. However, if the present system should continue, with SEE offered only to those children who opt out of SRE, then children who opt out of both SRE and SEE would need to be offered meaningful activity during this time period.

We also note that data are not available on the proportions of children opting for the various SRE options, SEE or non-scripture. These data are clearly necessary for the DEC and various stakeholders to understand the uptake of each option and the scale of issues relating to children who opt out of both SRE and SEE.

#### ***We suggest that:***

- ***“Non-scripture” is not needed if SEE is offered alongside SRE. If non-scripture were to continue, however, it should include meaningful learning activity.***
- ***Data must be collected to monitor the uptake of these various options.***

### *Ethics Curriculum*

We have no expertise in education for primary school children, so we cannot make informed comment on the curriculum. As parents, our view is that the ethics program provides our children with the opportunity to learn during the SRE period, something that was denied them until recently. The curriculum seems to include topics and questions that can form the basis of age-appropriate, stimulating discussion with children. Feedback from our supporters, many of whom are coordinators and volunteer teachers, is overwhelmingly positive about the curriculum. Our anecdotal evidence is that parents and children are excited and inspired by it.

***We suggest that scrutiny of the curriculum should be left to experts in this area.***

### *Suggested Improvements*

We note the concerns raised by Professor Philip Cam during this inquiry, relating to sustainability of the ethics and SRE programs. Professor Cam’s concern about ethics classes revolved largely around Primary Ethics’ lack of resources to retain the team of people needed to develop and implement the classes. However, we were satisfied with Primary Ethics’ response on 12<sup>th</sup> March, indicating that they have in fact been able to assemble such a team and that if they are given charitable status they will have the resources needed to support that team on an ongoing basis.

*We suggest the committee assist Primary Ethics in gaining charitable status*

Ms Catherine Byrne and Dr Meredith Doig raised concerns about the SRE system, in which religious instruction is from the perspective of only one religion. They talked about some of the benefits of learning about religion more generally. However, it is worth noting Dr Doig's comment that, in the absence of such an inclusive, comprehensive system including religion and ethics, she supports the current system of ethics classes as an option for children not attending SRE.

*We value our children's education in both ethics and religion, and we look forward to a recommendation from this Committee of Inquiry that addresses the need for a general religious education option.*

On the final day of the hearing, some Committee members questioned whether ethics classes had been introduced rapidly, without sufficient due process. As part of the discussion around this, a Committee member asked whether witnesses thought ethics classes should have been open to tender, so that various groups could bid to run ethics classes. This of course could open up the possibility that ethics classes could be run by groups from particular religious perspectives, making them essentially SRE classes. This was addressed by Simon Longstaff (Primary Ethics) who stated that the St James Ethics Centre was approached by parents as a potential provider of ethics classes from a secular perspective.

*The parent demand for ethics classes in NSW arose from the fact that there was no meaningful secular option to SRE. Ethics classes must be secular, and must be run by a group with no religious affiliation. Primary Ethics is such a group, and we see no reason to take responsibility for ethics classes to other groups.*

**2. Are you happy with the current recruitment process for volunteer teachers and the training that is offered?**

*Recruitment and Training*

In the SEE program, ethics classes cannot be offered at a school unless the school has a coordinator and teacher(s) for those classes. All ethics volunteers are interviewed by a Primary Ethics Volunteer Manager or coordinator and undergo Police checks. Ethics teachers who pass interview attend Primary Ethics two-day training and take an online course on child protection before they can teach an ethics class.

We are entirely satisfied that this system ensures ethics teachers have appropriate backgrounds, skills and attitudes.

**3. Your submission states that a recent poll in the Sydney Morning Herald indicated that 92% of people support ethics classes. Have you conducted any polling of your own amongst your members? Do you intend to?**

We do not intend nor believe we need to undertake any polling, because our supporters join us on the basis of their support for ethics classes, as a meaningful alternative to SRE. Apart from parents4ethics supporters, there is overwhelming public support for ethics classes as indicated in our submission. It is important to realize the extent of public support for these classes.

One way of gauging public support is to peruse the letters to editors in NSW on the issue of ethics classes. As part of this response to your question, we have collected letters that have been published in the Sydney Morning Herald over the period from March 2011 to March 2012. We have included only letters that express an opinion on ethics classes, and we have found that during this period, 20 out of 23 letters on this issue were in support of ethics classes. Writers of those 20 include one Reverend, one Baptist, a parent who coordinates ethics classes but whose children attend Catholic scripture classes, and one member of the Director-General's Consultative Committee on SRE representing a Christian denomination. Of the 23, only three are registered supporters of parents4ethics, illustrating the fact that public support extends far beyond our group.

The letters are reproduced below. We hope they serve as a snapshot of the overwhelming support, and the lack of need for further polling.

Yours sincerely

Michele Corin, David Hill, Maree Prefrement, Catherine Suttle, Tara Thomas, Russell Wyatt

Parents4Ethics

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*June 27<sup>th</sup> 2011*

The perils and pitfalls of using social media sites - discuss (Letters, June 25-26). This sounds like an excellent subject for ethics classes offered in schools, and an excellent reason why these classes should be mandatory for all NSW schools.

**Helen Lewin** TumbiUmbi

*July 19<sup>th</sup> 2011*

Fred Nile is bluffing ("Nile threatens to kill off ethics classes", July 19). If he supports Labor to torpedo O'Farrell's contentious public sector wages legislation, then the ethics classes stay in place. Sounds like a win-win to me, but he may not see it this way.

Ethics classes are not run in competition to religion classes. At least no more than video watching classes or do-your-own-thing classes. If children are not attending religious classes then they are free to do anything else - including ethics. And since when do bribery and stand-over tactics form part of Nile's religious ethics? Thank God his church is not teaching ethics classes.

**John Boast** Hunters Hill

I am a volunteer ethics teacher at my local primary school and have had nothing but positive feedback from students and parents alike. All my students had previously always opted out of special religious education classes and sat in the hall reading a book for 45 minutes each week. They are now critically thinking about ethical concepts and moral issues within a secular framework. They enjoy discussing topical and relevant philosophical issues and listening to each other's point of view. They discuss fairness, vices and virtues.

Maybe Fred Nile should take the course.

**Anousha Zarkesh** Austinmer

For most political decisions I can see that there are two sides to the story. On the introduction of ethics classes (held at the same time as religious instruction) I can see no justification whatsoever for the complaints.

Let's hope the O'Farrell government stays firm, or Fred Nile performs an ethical analysis of his own position.

**Glenda Browne** Blaxland

The Christian Democrats' threat to scuttle upcoming Government legislation if ethics classes are not cancelled in government schools should be seen for what it is, bully boy tactics.

If for some reason ethics classes were to be withdrawn from NSW schools then the Christian Democrats should be forever more known as the Fred DeNile Party.

**Stewart Smith** St Ives

One of the topics in the ethics class that my wife teaches at a local school is about keeping one's promises and commitments. She tells me that the students know full well that keeping promises is the right thing to do, and that unless there are good (moral) reasons against keeping a promise, then breaking one's word is wrong. I don't think she asked them whether political expediency in the form of doing a deal with a closed-minded reactionary counted as a good moral reason against keeping one's word, but I'm sure the 10-year-olds would have seen immediately that it is not.

Let's hope that the Premier has the moral sense of these students when he considers Fred Nile's offer to do a deal with him if he closes down this excellent program. What a disaster it would be if the ethics classes are "killed off".

**John Cully** Normanhurst

*August 1<sup>st</sup> 2011*

The offer of ethics classes has given the opportunity to learn right from wrong to students who are either not interested in mainstream religion or do not believe in the teachings on offer. How can we believe we are part of a secular democracy while removing an alternative to mainstream religious teaching? Mr Nile has a blinkered and outdated opinion of what constitutes moral education and Mr O'Farrell's government should not allow itself to be bullied into making an ethically bad decision.

**Phillip Vitek** Epping

To bow to Fred Nile in the matter of ethics classes would itself be an unethical act. Let the classes stay, and call Mr Nile's bluff, and let him wear the opprobrium of rejecting the government's other programs rather than the government wearing the opprobrium for caving in to a splinter group. Or is caving in to the Shooters Party setting a trend for this government?

**Christopher Borton** Bellevue Hill

The agreement between the Premier and the Reverend Nile appears to be face-saving for Mr Nile providing he agrees to the proposed public services wages bill. The Premier has agreed that the ethics classes will be discussed in two meetings, one in the parliamentary party room, the second in the Legislative Council.

I could not find in the announcement any agreement as to the outcomes of those meetings, such as a proposal to change the Education Act to remove the ethics classes.

Citizens should now push to achieve the following aims: registration of the group running the ethics classes, Primary Ethics, as a charity; expansion of the classes both in NSW and into all states as fast as possible; elimination of the school chaplaincy program and use of the money saved to institute a program of support for troubled students operated by accredited mentors, tutors and counsellors.

**John Turner** Carey Bay

*August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011*

While unsurprising, the unethical behaviour of Fred Nile is disappointing. I can only hope that Barry O'Farrell and Duncan Gay are able to behave ethically in light of this manipulative behaviour. Mr O'Farrell, please listen to the Christian community that is supportive of ethics classes alongside special religious education classes.

On the upside, perhaps there is an opportunity for SRE teachers, in their classes this week, to highlight issues of poor Christian ethics by exemplifying Mr Nile's behaviour over these classes.

**Rev Nicole Fleming** Balmain

My 12-year-old son is thoroughly enjoying his ethics classes at school. How could I explain their removal if this occurs? Would I have to tell him that the government thinks there is something wrong with ethics?

**Barbara Davis** Cheltenham

As the ethics co-ordinator at Hilltop Road Public School in Merrylands, I am very happy to support ethics classes. I recognise the tremendous value in these classes for our school community and our P&C Association has only received positive feedback and praise for the classes.

Incidentally, my own children don't go to ethics classes - they attend Catholic scripture. Freedom of choice, Mr O'Farrell - it's a beautiful thing. Don't take it away from NSW children and don't allow the government to be held to ransom by Fred Nile.

**Anne Cuskelly** Merrylands

As I understand the Biblical account of Jesus' time on earth, He went about offering His teachings to those who wanted to listen. There was never any suggestion that He attempted to impose His beliefs on others.

Fred Nile calls himself a Christian but he certainly doesn't follow in the footsteps of Christ. He entered the NSW Upper House in 1980 with a single issue - to stop members of the gay community from celebrating their own identity. By any estimation he failed in this attempt to force his views on the community.

After 30 years on a large publicly funded salary he is now attempting to force his own views on the community once more - this time to close down voluntarily attended ethics classes. His tactics are certainly not ethical and I can't see how they could be considered Christian.

**David Harris** Manly

Phillip Vitek (Letters, August 1) believes that ethics classes give students the opportunity to learn right from wrong. I would have thought that teaching right from wrong was the responsibility of the parents as the lessons could begin prior to attending school. That is, of course, on the assumption that they themselves know the difference.

**John Foster Burradoo**

*August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2011*

Unfashionable as it may be to support Fred Nile or to question the validity or value of ethics classes, I would see the introduction of a private member's bill by Mr Nile as an opportunity to address some questions about the process followed in the introduction of these classes. For all the talk of might and right and the benefit to children, these classes were part of a political agenda from the beginning. If it was fair enough for Mr Nile to chair the inquiry into the Labor government's last hasty attempts to sell off the state's electricity assets, it seems reasonable to allow the questioning of another hastily legislated program introduced, in part, to appease the Greens and try and save Verity Firth's seat.

Surely it can't threaten our children to ask why there was not open access to the curriculum material prior to its introduction or why ethics classes received favourable treatment in terms of advertising amongst school communities. We might also discover why Barry O'Farrell changed a public commitment to abolish the classes only weeks before the last election.

**Philip Cooney** Wentworth Falls

The recurrent issue of teaching ethics in NSW primary schools always reminds me of my time growing up in India in the 1970s.

While the students who opted to study "religion" had their own classes, others, like me, had the option of studying "moral science", the ethics equivalent. Are we so behind a "Third World" country - as it was in the 1970s, no less - that we continue to make this such an emotive issue?

**Manbir Kohli** Pemulwuy

I presume scripture classes are not just limited to Christianity. Just register a religion called the ethics religion. Then its teachings can be held at the same time as any other religion. Problem solved.

**Greg Henderson** Beaconsfield

I am puzzled by the efforts of various people to separate religion from ethics. How can you do this? I would consider myself an ethical person - and where did I learn my "ethics"? At a religious school. If you can observe the Ten Commandments properly and every day, you will be an ethical person. So where is the problem?

**Gloria Healey** Condell Park

*August 6<sup>th</sup> 2011*

I approached reading Fred Nile's article with some nervousness, but with Voltaire's famous dictum giving me strength and a sincere belief that I should at least try to understand views contrary to my own, I ploughed ahead through the mire ("Ethics lesson two: tell us the truth", August 5).

At first I was amused, as the colourful image of those "pagan Greens" chanting around a bonfire gripped my imagination. I became concerned on reading that Mr Nile wants to "thank Almighty God and the voters of NSW" for giving him the balance of power in the Legislative Council. He should save his thanks for the peculiarities of a voting system that allow a party with just over 4 per cent of the total to have any power at all.

I was disturbed by Mr Nile's understanding of the doctrine of the separation of church and state, which he thinks comes down to a "belief" held by certain dangerous elements in society, named as the Greens, the Labor Left and, presumably, anyone who thinks ethics classes should continue. Sorry to disturb your fantasy, Fred, but in the 847 years since the Council of Clarendon in 1164, the Western world has increasingly removed the powers of the church from those of government to the point where the only powers and freedoms it enjoys are those granted to it. Mr Nile's strange beliefs echo his confusion or disingenuousness. He claims that he did not indulge in blackmail, only reminded the Premier that he (Nile) may not vote for government legislation unless ethics classes were removed from schools. Personally, I would welcome this scenario, as both the removal of ethics classes and the proposed industrial relations laws are entirely wrong.

**Andrew Dalton** Annandale

I wish this whole issue of ethics would go away. It started around 2003 and, like the many-headed monster, pops up regularly in a new form. As a member of the Director-General's Consultative Committee on Special Religious Education representing a Christian denomination, I can say that we co-exist quite peacefully with the ethics classes. Indeed it has inadvertently ushered in a significant reform in religious education.

Reverend Nile is also correct in distinguishing between ethics and religion but he may not be aware that at grass roots level the introduction of ethics has further entrenched scripture as an essential component of general education. Maybe we should leave well-enough alone.

**James Athanasou** Maroubra

*Nov 15<sup>th</sup> 2011*

I cannot imagine why Fred Nile opposes ethics classes in schools for those who prefer it, although I taught scripture for 30 years.

As a Baptist I believe in "keeping baby dry" and baptising only those who have made up their own mind about Christianity.

So I ask why ethics classes should not go ahead. It is a very good alternative.

Fred acts like someone threatened with classes in crime. He gives all Christians a bad name.

**Flora Green** Bexley



Barry O'Farrell's decision on Friday to refer the ethics classes in primary schools to a committee ticks all the wrong boxes: broken promises and pandering to a minority in the upper house. This puts him in an embarrassing position when the Liberals are attacking the federal government in the lead-up to the next federal election.

**Susan Braham** Greenwich

*Feb 26<sup>th</sup> 2012*

Having attended the public hearing of the inquiry into ethics classes, it seems apparent that no one but Fred Nile wants the classes dismantled ("Scrutiny unfair': parents group blasts inquiry into school ethics classes", February 25-26). Even Dr Bernadette Tobin, who had some reservations about the content of the course, approved of the concept, as did the Reverend Dr Michael Jensen.

As someone who wasted hours of school life in non-scripture and whose son is now in year two and doing the same, I am thrilled another option has been unrolled. It is unfair that children who opt out of religious education are prohibited from doing any meaningful activity. Ethics classes offer a stimulating alternative and have met with overwhelming approval from parents and students alike. It is a waste of taxpayers' money and time to pursue this needless inquiry.

**Penny Szentkuti** Randwick