

Response to Questions on Notice

**Inquiry into the
Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011**

Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools

21 March 2012

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Question 1.

In the Report of the Proceedings before the Committee, Ms. Russell from Primary Ethics (Transcript for 24 February 2012 p. 15) said, “that most of our [SEE] classes are running in the Sydney metropolitan area, Newcastle and Wollongong, wherever the population is.”

Their submission to the Committee, the Department of Education and Communities (Submission No 181 p. 4) said of the schools offering ethics classes “62% are located in metropolitan NSW, 26% in regional areas and 12% in rural and remote locations.” This means that 88% of schools are in metropolitan and regional areas presumably, based on Ms. Russell’s evidence above, Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong. These statistics do not tell us what proportion of the estimated 3100 students are in these schools that represent 88% or 140 of the estimated 160 schools running a special education in ethics class. Given the larger size of schools in Sydney, Wollongong and Newcastle it is reasonable to expect that almost all the 3100 students are in these three cities. This substantiates our evidence that “ethics classes are mostly run in metropolitan areas.”

In regional and remote schools most SRE is done across denominations, or what providers of SRE call “joint denominationally”. This means a volunteer teacher works from a curriculum agreed on by local churches in the catchment of the school and represents all these churches. Most often the SRE teacher comes to regular classrooms at a time convenient to the teacher and the school administration. In many situations, the SRE teacher may do 2-3 classes a day. Practically this means SRE may occur on different days for different classes and stages.

Very few parents remove their children. Most parents, even those who do not identify as having a religion, have stated that they want their children to experience SRE to allow for a choice in belief, later in life. Generally SRE teachers are perceived as a significant person in the student's learning journey. Frequently they are often involved in other aspects of school life.

Question 2.

In our submission, we said that no school in the state gives the legislated 1-hour per week to SRE. In many situations, SRE providers like our members struggle to get 20 minutes “effective teaching” time. There appears to be an unofficial standard in primary schools of 30 minutes, which is most often then further eroded by movement of students, interruptions for messages, settling the class and school organisation. This means volunteers spend several hours preparing their lesson and then only get 20 minutes to teach. Over time this restriction can be very discouraging.

Just as significant for our members is the issue of the erosion of available weeks to teach SRE. There are about 36 effective teaching weeks in a school year. When schools don’t allow SRE to start until at least week 4 and insist that it finishes at the end of November the number of weeks is greatly reduced. It is not uncommon for schools to schedule events on SRE days and the end result is that volunteers probably get significantly less than 30 weeks or closer to half a year to enrich education in NSW schools. To guarantee 30 minutes of quality teaching would mean effective delivery of SRE.

With help from their local churches and individual donors, SRE teachers buy resources for both the teacher and the students. The resources provide lessons for almost every week of a standard school term. When the available weeks are significantly eroded by local decisions, often without consultation, the resources are wasted. This is a constant source of frustration.

Question 3

ICCOREIS is opposed to the idea of SRE being replaced. We are strongly opposed to a comparative religion course, a philosophy course or a general religion course being offered in its place.

A comparative religion course is beyond the developmental level of Years 5&6. There is a General Religious Education (GRE) section already, in Stage 2 of the Board of Studies *Human Society & Its Environment K-6 Syllabus*. In addition, a comparative religion course is available in high school as

the Board of Studies course *Studies in Religion*. In this course, students are taught about the five world religions in depth.

Aspects of philosophy are touched on in most subjects e.g., critical thinking, construction of knowledge, point of view. Higher Order Thinking, Substantive Communication and Problematic Knowledge are elements expected in all teachers' classroom practice and assessment according to the Department of Education and Communities Quality Teaching Framework.

A philosophy course begs the question, whose philosophy? Our submission to the Ethics Inquiry in 2010, which was attached to our submission to the current Legislative Council inquiry, made a strong case for a narrow school of philosophy as the source of the ethics pilot lessons. Our position remains that it is not possible to teach philosophy without values, even a quasi-faith commitment dictating the content of the course. A philosophy course would not help children question, explore and discover the faith of their parents or community.

A general religion course would be hard to distinguish from a comparative religions course. Our position is that everyone is religious in the broad sense that they trust in something or someone. A general religion course would have to include at least humanism, communism, Marxism and secularism because ideologies make claims to replace religion in the narrow sense. Again this sort of course is not appropriate for the developmental stage of Years 5 and 6 students.

As it stands, the current legislation protects the right of students to explore spiritual matters through SRE in a manner that none of the suggested options allows.