



Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney

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

Response by the
Anglican Education Commission in the Diocese of Sydney
to the Matters Put on Notice by Dr John Kaye
on Page 54 of the Uncorrected Proof of Transcript
(27 February, 2012)

Dr JOHN KAYE: So all the religions have a monopoly position within their sectors; they do not have to tender or go through any kind of competitive process.

Dr COWLING: We probably need to go back to the origins of how we ended up with 106 providers.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Would you mind if we did not? I am happy to take the information on notice.

The Further Information

Dr Kaye has opened up quite a significant issue which is just as relevant for SRE provision as it is for the provision of lessons in ethics. It is not one that the Diocese of Sydney has discussed, but if we are thinking of the provision of SRE and SEE over the next decade or more it could become quite important.

The Department of Education and Communities maintains a central register of the 'religious persuasions' as they have been called since 1880 which successive Ministers of Education (on the advice of the Department) have approved to provide SRE in government primary and secondary schools. The DEC has a set of criteria by which it determines whether a would-be provider is a bona-fide 'religion.' The most recent list contains over 100 SRE providers, varying between bodies which operate across the State (such as the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the Buddhist Council, Bahai etc.) and small independent churches serving only one or two schools in a particular suburb or country town. There is also a process by which an organisation's approval can be renewed each year.

If the Committee wanted to know how efficient and effective the approval and renewal process is, it would need to ask the Department of Education and Communities.

In respect to SEE, the St James Ethics Centre approached the Government of the day for approval to deliver ethics lessons as an alternative to SRE. When it was legislatively possible to do so, the Minister approved Primary Ethics Ltd to provide ethics classes state-wide. I do not know what criteria were used. Some people have asked why did the Government not invite tenders from community groups to provide such lessons. I am not sure whether the possibility of having a multiplicity of ethics providers was ever considered. It is not a concept that would sit comfortably with the doctrine of centralism in the history of public education in New South Wales. From a purely pragmatic point of view, there are great economies of scale to be had if there is just one provider operating state-wide. On the other hand, the Government could be accused of privileging one brand of ethics over others!

However, in ten years time, when public school principals have much more scope to make decisions locally, it is conceivable that schools will ascertain the wishes of their parents in relation to SRE and SEE and approach suitable providers from the area in which the school is located. For this to operate efficiently and harmoniously, the central office of the DEC will need to put in place a new system to protect its schools and the community from rogue providers.



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Response

by the

**Anglican Education Commission
Diocese of Sydney**

to

Questions on Notice from the Rev Hon Fred Nile

1. How do you see the current SRE and SEE in NSW fitting into a new National Curriculum?

Answer:

The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs determined in 2011 that the Australian Curriculum would be implemented in each State and Territory by their respective curriculum authority. In New South Wales that is the Board of Studies. The Australian Curriculum when it is fully implemented will occupy only 80% of the typical school timetable. Schools will still have 20% of discretionary time available each week in which to include learning that is not directly related to the Australian Curriculum. Independent schools already use that time to deliver faith-based courses, supplementary school-devised courses and co-curricula activities.

We expect that SRE and SEE will continue to be included in the timetable of government schools and occupy some of the discretionary time.

Note that with increasing parental pressure on individual schools to raise the level of student performance, the demands on this discretionary time will be more vigorously contested than ever before. These demands will have implications for the quantum of time allocated to SRE and SEE as well as their placement on the school timetable.

On the other hand, the implementation of the Australian Curriculum provides an opportunity for enterprising SRE and SEE curriculum developers to link their pedagogy and some of their lesson content to what students in a particular Grade are learning in their other subjects. This will not yield them more time but it will help to connect students' learning in SRE and SEE with that in their other subjects.

2. Will the Primary Ethics curriculum have a positive impact on SEE students?

Answer:

The answer to your question is not as straightforward as you might imagine. It depends, in the first place on what you mean by 'the Primary Ethics curriculum.' Do you mean the K-6 Curriculum Framework? Do you mean the printed notes prepared by Dr Knight for each of the lessons to be taught to students? Do you mean the enacted curriculum, that is what happens between the teacher and the students in the class in any given lesson? Any set of lesson notes or learning resources will have a positive impact on many or all of the learners if they are delivered enthusiastically, passionately and consistently by a teacher who is well prepared, knows their stuff and has a goal to ensure every child learns. We have no doubt that good voluntary teachers of SEE who build rapport with their classes will have a positive impact on their students. Conversely, voluntary teachers who are ill prepared, lack confidence, or cannot engage the students will have a negative impact, regardless of how good the curriculum framework and the supplied lesson materials are.

The same can be said about the SRE curriculum and lesson materials used by the various religious groups. The challenge for SEE teachers and for SRE teachers is to put in place some helpful strategies to measure the impact of their teaching on student learning. A teacher's job is not done when they have taught the lesson so much as when the student has learned. Too often SRE teachers assume that if they have presented good material the students have absorbed it and act upon it. SEE teachers face the same challenge.

3. What should the supervision model be for SEE volunteer leaders?

Answer:

We are not sure what the questioner means by 'volunteer leaders.' As we understand it, Primary Ethics Ltd appoints a voluntary 'School Co-Ordinator' to oversee the delivery of SEE in each school in which ethics classes are conducted. This person acts as the link between the voluntary teachers and the school principal, and we assume between the ethics teachers and the 'approved provider, viz. Primary Ethics Ltd' We also understand that Primary Ethics Ltd has appointed a number of voluntary 'mentors' to sit-in on ethics lessons and provide constructive feedback to the teacher on his/her teaching. These mentors also facilitate the 'professional development' of a certain number of voluntary teachers. If our understandings are correct, we think this is a very good model and should be considered by all SRE providers.

4. Could you amplify your view that the current SEE is not an ethics course but are 'lessons in philosophical reasoning'?

Answer:

At the time of writing our Submission, the only ethics lesson outlines we had seen, courtesy of Primary Ethics, were those that had been taught in the trial (in 2010) and during 2011 to students in Years 5 and 6. These lessons, on paper at least, seemed to us to be focused more on developing students skills in philosophical reasoning than in what the person in the street would describe as ethics or morality. Some of Dr Knight's comments in her Report to the Government seemed to confirm this and as she had seen the lessons in practice, we were inclined to believe her. Furthermore, Primary Ethics Ltd and the Department of Education both describe SEE as 'lessons in decision-making, action and reflection within a secular framework based on a branch of philosophy.' So, on page 13 of our Submission we asked 'whether the lessons in special education in ethics might be better described as lessons in philosophical reasoning rather than ethics' per se.

However, having looked at the recently released K-6 Curriculum Framework, we are inclined to concur with some of the comments made in the hearings by Professor Cam that the flavor of many of the 83 lessons, especially for Grades Kindergarten to Year 4, is more a mixture of social studies, elementary philosophical reasoning and discussion of moral dilemmas, for which the term 'ethics' might be considered misleading.

We also think it is unfortunate that the public has been led to believe that SEE is the only place in which ethical thinking or ethical understanding occurs in the school curriculum. The reality is otherwise. Furthermore, for the average parent, lessons in ethics are assumed to be about morals, what is right and what is wrong, when in actual fact the 'ethics lessons' being delivered by SEE teachers are much broader than that. That is why we think a term such as 'philosophical reasoning' although it is a mouthful for a primary student is a more appropriate term to use to describe what SEE teachers are promoting.

5. Is this reasoning suitable for the SEE age group?

Answer:

It is hard to know since all we have to go on for the lessons to be taught to students in K to 4 are the scanty annotations on the Framework document. Dr Knight assures us that students as young as the age of 4 can engage in meaningful philosophical reasoning. Dr Tobin disputes this. The very experienced teachers of students up to the age of 8 whom we consulted have their doubts about the capacity of inexperienced professional teachers with no prior training in philosophy to teach some of these lessons well, let alone the non-professional and minimally trained voluntary teachers Primary Ethics Ltd hopes to recruit.

Similar comments could be made about the teaching of certain theological concepts by voluntary teachers of SRE to students in K-4. It would be helpful to observe some voluntary teachers of SEE teaching a number of the proposed lessons to students in Kindergarten to Year 4 before SEE is extended to these grades. We don't have the same reservations about the capacity of Grade 5 and 6 children but it would be helpful to see such classes in action to verify this.

We would also want to say that it is not only the capacity of the students to think in this way but the capacity of each individual teacher to do so. A great deal rests on their shoulders.

6. Should the SEE students first undergo a course in what is right and what is wrong before they commence the SEE?

Answer:

We have a number of difficulties in responding to this question as well as Question 7.

The question does not recognise that for some students, their first contact with SEE is in Year 5. In future their first encounter could be in Kindergarten or anywhere in between.

The question assumes that SEE is primarily about learning the difference between right and wrong. Primary Ethics would say that SEE is broader than that.

The question assumes, wittingly or otherwise, that the SEE lesson is the first and most important context in which students address ethical thinking.

The reality is, by the time a student attends their first SEE lesson, their sense of what is right and what is wrong will have already been shaped by their parents, siblings, peers and regular teachers (let alone the society in which they live). It would be a rare primary school in which the shared values of our society are not inculcated in students without the need for SEE lessons.

But lying behind the question is a dangerous precedent that an SRE provider (since we have been asked for our comment) or a politician should determine the content of what is taught by another voluntary provider, whether SRE or SEE.

We have not invited Primary Ethics Ltd to tell us what should or should not be included in our SRE curriculum; in fact we have not sought the approval of the Department of Education and Communities to include particular lessons in our curriculum.

On the other hand, it is a reasonable question for the Committee to ask Primary Ethics Ltd whether it has considered the prior learning of students enrolling in SEE classes and the current knowledge of the voluntary teachers they have recruited to teach SEE.

7. Should the SEE include a section on the Judeo-Christian ethic as part of their overall education?

Answer:

See our answer to Question 6.

The term Judeo-Christian is rarely used in Australia, though it is used and abused quite a lot in the United States. For what purpose do students need to use such a term to describe the plethora of values and virtues that multiple cultures and ethnic groups have in common in our pluralist society?

8. Should your proposed 2014 review of SRE and SEE be conducted by an independent, qualified, professional educator to achieve a fairer result?

Answer:

Our recommendation is that the review of SRE and SEE in 2014 should be carried out by a team of competent, credible professional educators in whom the SRE providers, Primary Ethics and the Department of Education and Communities have confidence they can deliver an objective, constructive and forward-looking report on the quality of teaching and learning in these areas. The task is too big and too complex for one person. The team or committee needs to have access to a wide range of different SRE and SEE classes in Sydney and across the State. The leader of the team needs to be appointed in 2013 and all parties need to be informed of the purpose, terms of reference and modus operandi well in advance. There needs to be maximum transparency about this review.

9. You stated you made your views clear to the previous ALP Government concerning the proposed Ethics Course. What were those views?

Answer:

We made our views clear on numerous occasions to the previous ALP Government, to the Premier and to the Minister for Education in person and in writing. Prior to, during and after the trialling of the ethics lessons we questioned the motives of the various parties and the Government in proposing the trial, we questioned the validity of the claim that 'ethics classes' were needed to occupy the large number of 'non SRE attendees,' we questioned the genuineness and objectivity of the trialling in ten self-selected schools, we challenged the 'secrecy' in which the trial was conducted, we questioned the Minister's impartiality, and in the absence of satisfactory responses to our questioning we concluded that the Government's ultimate aim was to remove SRE from schools altogether.

10. What terms should be used instead of SRE and SEE?

Answer:

We quipped in our Submission that someone wiser than us should propose a nomenclature that is accurate and understandable to the ordinary citizen for -

- (a) a religious education that is denominationally/sectionally specific on the one hand; and
- (b) a program that is about a particular kind of ethical thinking and philosophical reasoning on the other.

In other circumstances, the term 'religious education' would be adequate for (a) but in the light of our suggestion that a version of 'general religious education' for all students should be developed, this term is not the answer.

Further thinking and brainstorming is needed.