

Submission
No 440

**INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS
CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011**

Name: Ms Jane Needham

Date received: 24/02/2012

Partially Confidential

Memorandum

To: Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2

From: **Jane Needham**
Teacher trained to provide Ethics course during Ethics Trial in 2010
Ethics Co-Ordinator for I
Parent of a child attending Ethics

Date: 24 February 2012

Re: Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011 (Inquiry)

1. I am strongly opposed to the repeal of the legislation providing Ethics as an alternative to SRE for children in NSW primary schools.

My experience as a teacher of Ethics

2. In 2010 I was trained by Professor Cam to assist in providing the pilot programme Ethics course to a group of about 12 children at Public School. The children were a mixed group of years 5 and 6 pupils, and ranged in academic ability from children who were academically challenged and who showed very little verbal ability, to children who were very articulate and have since gone on to attend selective high schools. Similarly the socio-economic, and cultural, backgrounds were very diverse.
3. My experience of the curriculum is that it provides an opportunity for children at all levels of academic ability to bring their minds to bear on what is right, what is wrong, what is acceptable and what is not. I found that children were able to express their sometimes very strong views on all aspects of the curriculum – doubtless reflecting both their education and their parents' values – but the course also taught them to listen to, and to value the opinions, of others. The course enabled them to be respectful and thoughtful members of the microcosm of society in evidence in the classroom. In my view this is a highly useful skill to take into high school, employment and beyond.
4. The articulate, highly verbal children revelled in the chance to expand upon their views on subjects such as the ethical treatment of animals, graffiti (a very animated discussion!) and fairness. The less verbal children, due to the format of the classes, were able to find their voices and were listened to respectfully.

5. Being trained for, and then teaching, the pilot programme of the Ethics course taught me just as much as, I think, it taught the children. It was an extremely valuable experience.
6. My discussions with the school principal and the class teachers reinforced the value of the programme. The children carried on the discussions back to and sometimes into the regular classes, and the class teacher sought information on what was being discussed in Ethics that week so he could be prepared for the ongoing discussion when his year 5/6 children returned.

My experience as an Ethics Co-ordinator

7. I was so impressed by the Ethics course that I applied to become Ethics Co-ordinator for the school. In that role I have dealt with:-
 - (a) Primary Ethics;
 - (b) the school principal;
 - (c) class teachers;
 - (d) the parent body;
 - (e) the P&C; and
 - (f) SRE teachers at the school.
8. Co-ordinating the Ethics programme has given me a wider vision of the value of the programme. This year over 30 children in years 5 and 6 (of around the 50 students in those years overall) have sought to take Ethics. All but around 3 of them were formerly doing non-SRE (or, for the year 6 children continuing in Ethics, were doing non-SRE the year before when they started in Ethics in 2011). It is my view that the Ethics programme has impacted only very marginally on the teaching of SRE at [redacted] Public School.
9. Each of the class teachers of years 5 and 6 is very supportive of the class. They assist in supervising the Ethics classes and have commented to me on the significant level of engagement of the children in the course.
10. I have been overwhelmed by the parental interest in Ethics. I am a parent of kindergarten children this year and I am often approached by parents of kindergarten children wishing to know when Ethics will be available for their child. As there is a large non-SRE cohort in this year's Kindergarten class, I doubt that the availability of the Stage 1 curriculum in the next few years will impact greatly on the teaching of SRE at [redacted] School.

My experience as a parent of a child attending Ethics

11. My child in year 5 has recently commenced the Ethics course. The feedback given to me has been very positive. "It was very interesting – we talked about a fair society". "I can't wait for the next Ethics class!".
12. While my child was enrolled in SRE in Kindergarten and in year 1, I chose to opt out of SRE after that as I was not enamoured of the style of SRE teaching offered in years 2 and beyond. It seemed very hard-line and not in conformity with my family's own beliefs.
13. My child's experience in non-SRE consisted of watching videos or colouring in. There were complaints of boredom – never good at the start of a learning day! I started sending in a small craft kit on Wednesdays to give my child something to work on during that vacant half-hour between the commencement of school hours and 9.30, when the SRE children returned to enable the rest of them to start on learning. While I appreciate the position, both historical and cultural, that SRE has in schools, I am of the view that some kind of meaningful choice should be given to parents who do not wish their children to have religious instruction within schools (or, for parents of non-mainstream Christian faiths, who are unable to have their own faith provided at school).

Conclusion

14. I consider that I have been privileged to have an insight into all of the options available to children at public schools; I have attended an SRE class as an observer, I have seen children in non-SRE, and I have taught the Ethics curriculum. My child has participated in all three options, and the most positive response we have heard was to the Ethics course.
15. I strongly oppose the introduction of the *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011* and endorse the Ethics classes continuing as an option for parents and their children in public primary education.

Jane Needham