

**Submission
No 397**

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

Name: Mr Nathan Lee

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To the Review Panel,

I would like to voice my complete support for the Primary Ethics course. It was long overdue and I wish that it had been available when I was a child. Any suggestion to remove this option should be considered as equivalent to arbitrarily banning one religious SRE.

For parents wanting their children to use the SRE time effectively but without religious indoctrination the ethics course is incredibly important.

We should not consider returning to the blatant discrimination against the non-religious /minority religions by cancelling the program. Removing this option would run contrary to anti-discrimination laws, our constitutional secular nature and the public education system's secular mandate.

1. The course yields positive results in children

As a volunteer teacher of the course I have witnessed the growth of the class full of children from simple "yes/no" type responses to clearly giving reasons behind their views and considering the ethical concerns of the questions put to them. They have also appeared to have developed a greater empathy along a number of topics (e.g. homelessness for instance does not get used as a joke by the students after they learned some facts about it and had discussions of the implications/causes of it) and I think more self-reflection of their possible actions or views on topics.

2. Primary ethics volunteers are required to undergo rigorous safety checks beyond the minimum required by the department

Primary Ethics has a requirement that the other SRE providers do not seem to have which is that all ethics teachers submit to (and pass) a police history check. I am appalled that the religious organisations, with a long and continued record of child abuse and failure to act on problems, do not require SRE volunteers undergo police checks.

I would urge the review panel recommend that all SRE providers follow the Primary Ethics example and submit their volunteers to the same child safety standards of a police check.

3. Religious SRE should be reviewed rather than singling out ethics (again)

I would ask that the existing SRE options be subject to some sort of review for suitability of content for young children: the ethics course has already had independent review, P&C and department collaboration at every level. The Churches, NSW teachers federation, education department, NSW Coalition/ALP/Greens and most importantly: children appear ok to have it as an option.

4. The ethics course, offering religion neutral/secular option is incredibly popular

This course was created in response to a lobbying effort by parents and P&C groups to give children a meaningful non scripture option¹.

At my school more than half of the year 5/6 students wanted to attend or had parents who indicated that they wanted their children to attend. In another school somewhere near 90% are currently in non-scripture, having opted out of religious SRE.

This indicates many parents do not want their children receiving a religious SRE option and they should be permitted that choice (as it does not limit existing SRE options at all).

As an aside: If bans on handing out sweets/lollies/presents/show bags in SRE time were in place I suspect the number of children opting out of SRE time will still higher.

¹ History of the course: <http://www.ethics.org.au/content/ethics-based-complement-to-scripture>

5. It is unfair to ban one religious group's SRE option while leaving others

It would be unthinkable to ban just Catholic SRE or have a ban on Islam while allowing all others to continue SRE.

It's an all or nothing – either cancel SRE entirely or let the “no religion”/secular option exist alongside the other options.

6. There is always the opt-out option and existing SRE options are unchanged

There is no compulsion in the non-scripture option to attend ethics – it is entirely optional.

Children can always sit and do nothing as they used to prior to ethics when they did not have the option of meaningful content during this timeslot.

Compare this to school chaplaincy (which is overwhelmingly Christian and a glaring violation of secular education principles, just like having no secular option available in SRE time would be) there is no effective opt out as the staff are embedded in the school and potentially are involved in excursions/events and the like.

Ethics is provided only in the SRE timeslot and parents/children have complete choice in whether to avoid it or join it.

7. Children can get both ethics and religious instruction

There have been Sunday school (or other religious equivalent) available from Churches/Synagogues/Temples/Mosques for hundreds if not thousands of years prior to secular public education systems like the one we have in NSW. If ethics is so useful it must be attended by all students then the solution for parents wanting a religious instruction as well is one of the following:

- attend ethics in school and religious instruction outside school
- attend ethics one year, religious instruction the next year

As with many matters relating to child rearing - parents are the ones to decide which of the available SRE options they wish to take.

8. Religious SRE has absolutely no independent review

I have heard a number of disturbing reports from School teachers and parents including:

- Religious creationist content is presented to the children as factual/historical despite all scientific evidence to the contrary.
- An SRE group requiring donations from the parents or else the children be excluded from the class. Parents complained of this pressure to donate (or else suffer the resulting social/cultural repercussions of not having children go to that SRE class).
- A child arriving home frantic that they be baptised or else they would be “tortured for eternity” after receiving an SRE session which presented this damaging psychological threat to the children.

Complaints are relayed to the local church group. Given the world-wide reputation for failing to properly act on complaints I think this is unacceptable and a process should be in place to have any and all complaints handled (and recorded for analysis and review) by the department.

If the ethics course is up for review - the whole of SRE should be up for review.

9. Ethics course content has been reviewed and trialled in conjunction with the department of education

The department examined and reviewed the content and the feedback was merged into the course. Some topics were removed and altered as a result of this process.

None of the material presented by religious SRE providers has been reviewed by the department and as a result parents have had children arriving home with statements that, were they not from religious books, would constitute mental abuse (e.g. fear of torture).

The material and course content was trialled at a small number of schools and the feedback worked into the course. This indicates a sensible, measured approach to introducing the course.

10. Ethics course has been independently reviewed by the last NSW govt

An independent reviewer (Dr Knight) was charged with reviewing the ethics trial² which was positive and which a number of the feedback items have since been merged into the course and it was rolled out³.

As far as I'm aware the religious SRE providers have never had a govt directed review and they have been allowed to teach whatever and however they like.

11. The ethics course is NOT about moral relativism and exposes moral relativism as flawed

Mr Nile asserted in parliament and in the media that this course was about moral relativism; that is a false claim that has clearly been addressed in a number of places and by a number of people consistently since before the program was being evaluated:

- The Primary Ethics website⁴
- The St James ethics centre website⁵
- Spokesmen/women for the program (including public debates and statements)
- The review of the ethics course by Dr Knight which Mr Nile referred to in his speech
- Media reports of the above⁶

It seems unlikely that despite all this Mr Nile can still be saying the course is teaching moral relativism.

12. SRE time is teaching material which is not age appropriate, immoral, disturbing or contrary to law

Ethics does not teach the following (which are from Christian SRE) where all manner of crimes are ok so long as god is committing them:

- A parent should be prepared to do anything including murdering their child if told to do so by god (I was told the story of Isaac and Abraham as a child in scripture)
- that sins and crimes of mankind are absolved by sacrificing a child (the story of Jesus, a fundamental part of Christian mythology)

² The full text of the review including recommendations:

https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/detresources/Ethics_Evaluation_Final_Report_11112010_HQssrhmwk.pdf

³ Article "NSW signals roll out of ethics classes" -

<http://www.educationreview.com.au/pages/section/article.php?s=Breaking+News&idArticle=18820>

⁴ See <http://www.primaryethics.com.au/building.html> the text is "Blind appeal to authority and moral relativism are exposed as bad moral reasoning in Advertising and Whaling respectively."

⁵ This was prior to the Primary Ethics website taking ownership of the ethics program.

⁶ Media references: ABC Unleashed - <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/2802984.html>, Religion and Ethics <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/07/20/3273924.htm>

- You are constantly being watched and judged not only on what you do, but on what you think (another damaging concept for children to be taught as fact)
- Any crime whatsoever can be forgiven if you believe in Jesus and ask forgiveness (this runs contrary to our legal system and is a deeply unethical concept – children should not be taught this notion contrary to Australian law)
- Sexism and misogyny⁷ (this is contrary to the Australian anti-discrimination laws),
- Homophobia (surely not a suitable ideology to be potentially presenting to children, again – violates anti-discrimination laws intended to prevent vilification based on sexuality),
- Rape (Genesis 19:5-8 has a father offering up his two daughters to be raped)
- Incest (Genesis – a likely first chapter for a child reading the bible handed out in SRE time)
- Mass Murder & mass infanticide (including god’s slaughter of all humanity, all the first born sons in Egypt, entire cities, entire ethnic groups – children are coached that whatever the crime – god is right in doing so and should be unconditionally loved/worshipped – this was also taught to me in scripture many years ago)

With SRE time it seems there should be some review of the material presented in SRE time to ensure it is appropriate to the age group (as ethics has done with the Dept. of education).

Consider if other books contained the above topics found in religious texts – they are unlikely to be approved reading for infants/primary school children.

Mr Nile’s speech in Parliament introducing this review of ethics contains a number of falsehoods upon which this review may be assuming correct

In response to the speech made in parliament leading to this review there are a number of false and misleading claims made by Fred Nile:

- *"I believe that that course does not teach children right from wrong but promotes the secular humanist relative philosophy where there are no absolutes, such as 'You shall not murder', 'You shall not lie', and 'You shall not steal.'"*. Believing something does not make it so. There is no requirement for SRE time to teach "absolutes". An even cursory glance at the topics of the course would show that it is designed to cover ethical enquiry specifically on those issues listed (and much beyond those topics).
- *"Even Dr Knight, who conducted the review for the Australian Labor Party Government, said that the course should not be called an ethics course; rather, it should be called a philosophical relativism course, with which I agree."* - She clearly said no such thing and in fact talks about religious groups incorrectly claiming this relativism notion⁸. There is no reference in the report by Dr Knight to changing the name. Her quote on religious groups receiving more information to avoid this mistake appears to apply to Mr Nile: *"Such information would have gone some way to allay fears that the course is based on moral relativism or mere values clarification and related worries that within an ethical inquiry approach peer pressure becomes the arbiter of moral worth."*; clearly Mr Nile is misrepresenting the findings to parliament or hasn’t read the report.
- *"Relative ethics is the basis of secular humanism."* - No it is not and actually runs contrary to the concept. It is pretty hard to have the concept of “justice” and “reason” if anything goes. Perhaps Mr Nile is making this assumption due to ignorance rather than a lie; Either way it is false.

⁷ Various including that women should remain silent in church e.g. 1 Corinthians 14:34

⁸ See

https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/detresources/Ethics_Evaluation_Final_Report_11112010_HQssrhmwk.pdf for the evaluation final report from Dr Knight

- "No-one in the church supports the ethics course. There is no question about that." This is clearly false particularly when both the Catholic and Anglican Church have publicly said they do not wish to have it removed.
- "Dr Knight said it is dealing with philosophical relativism." - I believe he takes this to mean it is *teaching* relativism rather than showing it to be a silly concept. In her review she recommends that relativism be discussed, but that's in order to clarify how different the ethics course intent is from relativism.
- Mr Nile cites "situational ethics" which is actually a theory originally developed by Christian ethical philosophy⁹. He implies ethics course is about situational ethics. It is not and actually counters the notion of concepts like situational ethics. Any course on philosophy, ethics, religion or morality would typically present certain situations as discussion points but that is different to "situational ethics".
- Mr Nile claimed he spoke for the churches, but they have issued public statements that they do not want any further review/disruption and the matter is settled with them¹⁰.
- The Ten Commandments contain references to slavery and to notions which are contradictory to our legal system¹¹ - As such they are of extremely limited use as a moral guide to situations encountered in our modern society.

Conclusion

The ethics course has already been subject to numerous reviews at every level while the SRE religious options have had no review, no department vetting of content, no effective child safety (mandatory police checks) and countless complaints swept under the carpet.

If there is to be SRE time - then it is religious discrimination to consider eliminating one religious group's structured option (the "no religion" or secular group). While the course is open to all, it is the only choice available for those not wishing a religious indoctrination option in that timeslot but still having a structured course.

Please do not seek to impose the will of a tiny minority who wish to deny children a meaningful secular option in SRE time – it would be highly unethical and unfair.

If ever there was proof of a group in need of examining the ethical basis of their argument – it is those who would remove this option from the NSW SRE time.

Regards,

Nathan Lee

⁹ From http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/introduction/situation_1.shtml - "Situation ethics was originally devised in a Christian context"

¹⁰ Anglican church: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/nile-isolated-as-anglicans-back-ethics-classes-20110720-1hp05.html>, Catholic and Anglican: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-07-21/major-churches-back-nsw-ethics-classes-210711/2804492>

¹¹ e.g. blasphemy, worshipping another religion and working on weekends are not crimes in Australia as a secular democracy