

Submission
No 326

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

Name: Mr Neil Devine

Date received: 24/02/2012

Partially Confidential

To the committee members,

I am writing to you to express my full support for the Ethics program as proposed by St. James Ethics.

I am a parent of a child at _____, one of the largest schools in the state. My partner taught one of the classes during the pilot of the program, and is now the ethics co-ordinator at _____. Our daughter is not yet old enough to attend the Ethics program, but I want her to, and I call on the state government to see to it that she has that opportunity.

There is no doubt that the ethics program is a contentious issue. And as with most such issues, the arguments often degenerate into name calling and slander, bear little resemblance to the facts, and ignore or belittle any attempt at logic or reason. I must be honest here, this is my fourth attempt at writing this submission – the previous three did indeed degenerate, for which I am ashamed. I will do my best to ensure that this submission sticks to the issues at hand, and is constructive.

Such passion does have its purpose though. This is the first time I have been suitably motivated to attempt a submission on any issue, and the first time I have actively sought to shape government policy.

From the many conversations I have had regarding the issue of the ethic program, by far the most common argument against is that parents do not know what is in the curriculum. Therefore, how can you be sure that they are teaching values that you, as a parent, agree?

Here I shall turn to logic – which I have already stated is usually ignored for issues that people feel strongly about – to show why this argument is flawed on two counts. First, there is a curriculum, which has been approved by the Department for Education (DET), and has been reviewed and proofed. Second, none of the people who show such concern for the lack of curriculum for ethics are in the slightest concerned that Special Religious Education (SRE) lacks any curriculum of any sort – approved or otherwise.

The second most common argument that I hear is that Christianity and SRE are a part of the Australian way of life and culture. Again this is flawed on two counts. First, SRE is not (or at least no longer) Scripture. It now includes Buddhist, Moslem, Hindu, Jewish, Shintoist, Taoist, and quite possibly Pastafarian. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Spaghetti_Monster.) Our culture is no longer merely divided into Catholics vs. Protestants. The various denominations of Christianity co-exist with numerous other belief systems, both in our way of life and our culture.

This is a *multi*-cultural nation. It is, in my belief, the second greatest thing about this country. The greatest thing is the pervasive concept of 'fair go.' And that is the second reason that this argument is flawed. If you accept that an important aspect of our culture is that everyone deserves a fair go, how can you oppose a program whose sole purpose is to extend the ethical education afforded to children that attend SRE to those who come from a family whose religious views are not catered to by the SRE programs available to them. How can you oppose a program that aims to offer a fair go to children that are overlooked by the more mainstream religions.

The third argument that seems to occur, is that the program is nothing but a method of brainwashing our children. I have to confess, this argument is probably the one that holds my ire most strongly, and it's often from here that the arguments degenerate into a shouting match. I well remember the SRE I received as an impressionable child. It was indeed brainwashing. No doubt, and no question.

The ethics program does not work like that. Quite the opposite - students are presented with a

situation, and asked what *they* would do, what *they* think. They discuss the situation themselves, with their *own* reasoning, their *own* beliefs about the world, and they come to *their own* conclusions. The role of the teacher in these classes is to keep them on topic, and keep out of the way.

For most of the students taking part in the ethics program, this will be their first real exposure to student centred learning – which is the method of teaching being taught to new teachers entering the profession now.

The most loudest and longest arguments against the ethics program come from those people who have strong ties to their own religion. Such people are simply trying to protect their own interests. They fear that by allowing a secular alternative they will lose the opportunity to indoctrinate and brainwash a new generation of followers, and ignore the fact that the people the program appeals to and is designed and intended for is those people whom religion does not cater to.

Australia is a signatory to the UN bill of human rights. This international treaty enshrines in law the right of all people to freedom of religion. I put it to you that this also implies the right of freedom **from** religion – as atheism and agnosticism are both religions. The Australian Bureau of Statistics puts the number of declared atheists in this country at 18.7% - equal to the number of Anglicans (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Australia). By denying children of secular backgrounds the right to an ethical education, whilst enforcing a competing religious forum, you are discriminating against the religious views of a significant portion of our own population.

Furthermore the religious bodies that would like to force all children to their own belief systems are ignoring the obvious reason that the St James Ethics program came into existence in the first place – religion has already failed these children. For many people it lacks relevance, the very certainty and unchanging nature of church doctrine that made it so attractive to our parents also makes it inflexible and unwieldy when applied to a more complex world, where nothing is quite so straight forward.

This is why a secular ethics program is required, and why I ask that this committee allow the ethics program to continue. Religion and scripture/SRE is failing our children, and by extension our entire nation. It's all very well to moan that young people lack respect, but unless you intend to teach them respect that is all it can ever be. You can never reach them, they will never learn to behave in any other way. our entire society will decline as a result.

Regards,
Neil Devine
Parent