

**Submission
No 230**

INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011

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The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Submission to NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Education Amendment (Ethics Classes repeal) Bill 2011

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am the Ethics Coordinator at Forest Lodge Public School in Sydney. I write with grave concern that our newly introduced Special Education in Ethics classes may be prevented from continuing. Whilst I welcome parliamentary scrutiny of any area of the NSW education curriculum that aims to improve outcomes for students, it seems most premature, after barely one year, to attempt to draw conclusions on the merits of the ethics program. However, as the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Education Amendment (Ethics Classes repeal) Bill 2011, intends to do so, I submit that at our school, the ethics classes are a resounding success.

The request for the introduction of Special Education in Ethics classes into NSW Primary Schools was driven by a several decades long grass roots campaign by parents and citizens who believed in the basic rights of children who opted out of SRE to be allowed to put this time to productive use and to be educated in philosophical ethics outside of any religious dogma. As this program was intended only for students who had already opted out of attending Special Religious Education, it was a surprise to many in the community that the Anglican and Catholic Churches in particular, were so aggressively opposed to these classes.

That the recommendations of the 1980 Rawlinson Committee, which were to ensure that those students who opted out of SRE were given an opportunity for 'purposeful secular learning' were not implemented due to the lobbying of the aforementioned religious groups, was a shocking denial of the democratic rights of those students to be permitted to use that time each week for productive learning. It has meant that since 1980, when the issue was first raised in parliament, somewhere between 5-60 percent of primary students have been discriminated against on the basis of their non-christian faith or indeed their disinterest in faith.

The attack on Ethics classes by the churches has been well covered in the media, but it is important to note that in the year since the introduction of Ethics as an alternative to SRE, both the Anglican and Catholic churches have dropped their opposition to the classes. (<http://bit.ly/ruHxeY>) Why then, given the opposition to Ethics classes was almost exclusively from these Christian groups who have now agreed to support them, is there a need for a parliamentary inquiry?

When the state of NSW took over the responsibility for education from Anglican and Catholic churches in 1880, the number of people who identified themselves as having no religion was just 0.4 percent. At the last census in 2001, that number had increased to 18.7 percent of Australia's population. This number is likely to be even larger in 2012. Furthermore, the multicultural nature of our contemporary society brings with it an increase in the proportion of people of faiths other than Christian. The introduction of Special Education in Ethics classes reflects these changes by offering a growing number of students a legal right to an alternative to traditional Christian teachings.

Our school's student population reflects these demographic changes. At a P&C meeting in 2010, fourteen members debated whether to support the introduction of Special Ethics classes. An overwhelming majority (13 to 1) voted in favour. Our classes began in term 3, 2011 and of a total of 90 students in years 5 & 6, 48 commenced and continued with Ethics classes. I expect the numbers for 2012 will be similar. These students are now spending half an hour per week not colouring in, not watching videos, as was previously the case, but engaging in age appropriate thinking and discussion on important ethical and moral issues.

The curriculum asks students to consider subjects that are crucially relevant to the society we live in today, ranging from the very personal, 'Friendship', 'Telling a Secret' and 'Intention' to topics about the impact of people's actions on each other and the world around us. These include 'Can war ever be just', 'Gossip and Social Media' and 'An ethical life.' Most importantly, the curriculum is available to all SRE teachers and others should they wish to include it in their lessons.

Since St James Ethics Centre founded Primary Ethics, the organisation responsible for managing Ethics classes, the volunteer membership has grown to over 400 people (December 2011) and is projected to reach 1000 people this year. This surely demonstrates unequivocal community support for the continuation of ethics classes. In my community, there is much hard work, enthusiasm and ongoing effort by many parents and citizens interested in making a contribution to Primary Ethics and to the outcomes for students who attend ethics classes. Our intention is that students will emerge better thinkers, have an improved understanding of the consequences of their actions and a greater propensity to make a useful contribution to the world in which they live.

If our democratic system is designed to promote justice, equity and fairness for all, then the introduction of Special Education in Ethics into primary schools is a great example of a functioning democracy; one that responds to changes in the needs of its citizens and acknowledges a simple but important right - the right to choose one subject over another without discrimination. The overwhelming support for this program in the wider community, the strength in the numbers of volunteers willing to devote time and resources to ensure its success and the preparedness of parents

and students to 'opt in' to the program in only its first year are surely a measure of its relevance and value to our society.

It is very clear our school community wants the right to choose ethics classes as an alternative to SRE. All the evidence suggests the parent and student community of NSW wish to maintain the right to choose ethics classes. The recruitment process for volunteer teachers and ethics coordinators to administer the ethics curriculum is open and transparent. Importantly, Primary Ethics cannot and will not force a school to commence an ethics program unless the school and its P&C ask for it. The ethics curriculum itself is accessible to all students, parents and school staff on the Primary Ethics website, and for the use of SRE teachers should they wish to use it.

I strongly believe that offering this material to primary students has the potential to create a more just, fair and happier society over time. The curriculum has been created to address issues in today's world and will be continually reviewed to ensure that it will always be relevant to students as they face the complex moral and ethical challenges of the 21st century.

The legislation prior to the amendment in 2010 was anachronistic and patently unfair. When I stop to consider a valid counter-argument to the continuation of ethics classes, I am lost. In his demand for the repeal of the legislation, where does Reverend Nile see fairness and social justice for the primary students and parents of NSW?

Yours faithfully

Derek Allan
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