

**Submission
No 24**

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

Name: Ms Sara Bowen

Date received: 2/12/2011

Sara Bowen

2nd December 2011

Dear Beverly,

Reference: *The establishment of a committee to examine "the stated objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness and other related matters pertaining to the current operation of 'special education in ethics' being conducted in State schools, and whether the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed"*

I am writing to make a personal submission to the Committee to express my disappointment and concern about yet another investigation into Ethics lessons in public schools. I would like to raise two key points:

- Firstly, there has never been a similar public investigation into Special Religious Education (SRE) classes. Instead they are a "fact" of state school life since the 19th century, weathering every change in educational philosophy and practice, without any assessment of their perceived value or effectiveness in educating modern Australian children in the values and behaviours that this country requires. Why not? Ethics classes have been subjected to rigorous scrutiny before being offered as an option to New South Wales parents. I welcome independent and non-partisan review of Ethics classes *again*, if it is absolutely necessary, but it is absolutely iniquitous that their existence should be reviewed *again* without a parallel investigation into SRE classes on the same terms.
- Secondly, if the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 is repealed as a result of such an investigation there will no longer be a legal obligation to offer Ethics classes as a meaningful alternative for children whose parents do not attend SRE classes. If that happens, parents who do not wish their children to attend SRE classes will be discriminated against. This in itself is unacceptable and unethical, and will affect thousands of families and children in New South Wales.

I come from the UK, a country with an 'established' State church (the Anglican Church), yet there is less faith-based education in the classroom in English state schools than in Australia. I came here and was honestly appalled at what I found. At my local state primary school the Principal had the responsibility to implement SRE in his classrooms but no responsibility for the form, content or delivery of that teaching, or control over who taught. That responsibility was delegated to a local group of churches which, since the Anglicans have their own local K-12 school and the Catholics have their own education system, was effectively hi-jacked by a plethora of evangelical groups. The result is that my daughter was taught by a member of a congregation aligned with an American church group that teaches that homosexuality is sinful, denies evolution and has other beliefs to which I profoundly object. Yet this was being taught in a mainstream *STATE* school.

When I chose to withdraw my daughter from SRE lessons she was told she had to remain in the same classroom during SRE lessons, but was denied any other activity (including reading a book). When I

complained that she was still effectively being taught SRE she was permitted – under protest and only after a meeting with the Principal and writing a letter – to sit on a bench in the open under the Principal’s window because no staff member was available to supervise her. When we pursued the matter to State level we were simply told that we had to take matters up with the Principal and that the person I spoke to “hoped” we wouldn’t move our child into the independent education sector. The Principal told us that it was “too difficult” to do anything about the system or about specific SRE teaching in his school, and that teaching any biological sciences or early history was “too controversial” in his school so had to be left to High School.

I find the whole situation incomprehensible. Why should my daughter not receive teaching about morality and ethics and values and how to be a good person and live a worthwhile life in modern Australia? What possible threat does that create? And why should we be discriminated against in wishing our daughter to have a worthwhile activity while her classmates have SRE? With great sadness we have moved our daughter into a small independent school with a clear system of ethics and values that considers all religions in context.

I trust that the Committee will exercise common sense in its appraisal of the situation and recognize that the *whole* system should be reviewed rather than just one part of the system. I hope that the Committee understands that the views I express in this letter are shared by many voters in many electorates across the State, and represent a pragmatic, thoughtful and caring response to the fair and equitable education of our children. I desire my daughter to grow up in a demonstrably fair society in which religious and social tolerance form part of a basic framework of shared values. I do not believe that this framework is the preserve of the Christian right.

Yours sincerely,

Sara Bowen