

Submission
No 90

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

Name: Mrs Roslyn Deal

Date received: 4/02/2012

Partially Confidential

RE: EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS) ACT 2010

To the GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO.2,

I am writing this submission as a Christian individual who is active in my local school community through activities such as school volunteering, P and C meetings, fundraising, canteen, and volunteer teaching primary school Christian Scripture (SRE). My views in this submission are my own and don't reflect the views of any of the organisations I am involved with. I have kept this submission as brief as possible and may be able to appear before your enquiry should you wish me to elaborate on the opinions expressed below.

Objectives:

I have followed the ethics debate in the media and was surprised with the Parliamentary submission¹ that the previous arrangement for those who drop out of SRE was "a social justice and youth mental health issue". While I agree that all students should be suitably engaged during SRE time, I dispute the argument that the 'Ethics Course' is an acceptable alternative to the current SRE arrangements. The new legislation allows for Special education in ethics as a secular alternative to special religious education at government schools. For those who object to a faith based lesson under the previous rules for special religious education, I believe that Atheism (a course designated as Atheism worldview)

¹ Request for ministerial approval to proceed with a Pilot Project to test the concept of offering an Ethics-based Complement to Scripture in NSW Primary Schools For the consideration of the Hon Verity Firth MP, NSW Minister for Education and Training/NSW Minister for Women by the St. James Ethics Centre (Sept 2009).

would be an acceptable alternative (after all it could still be described as a belief system). I view the objectives of the Ethics Course as flawed and believe that teaching on Atheism could be incorporated into the previous definition of special religious education.

Curriculum:

It is hard (actually it is impossible apart from 2 sample lessons) to assess the Ethics curriculum as despite earlier statements², the whole curriculum has not been made public³.

My husband requested the curriculum material through the Primary Ethics website, and we have been advised by email that copies can only be provided through my denominational 'Educational Board'. I don't know what an educational board is and I have spoken to the 'Presbyterian Youth Department' who hadn't seen the curriculum. I have procrastinated formally requesting my denomination to then formally request the material from Primary Ethics. I find it a concern that the curriculum material is not practically available.

Implementation:

In incidental conversations with local parents and teachers about the 'Ethics Course' it appears anecdotally that there is a common misunderstanding as to what the 'Ethics Course' involves. The choice of the name 'Primary Ethics' implies to parents that students will be learning right from wrong. Rather the 'Ethics Course' is more of a lesson in 'philosophical enquiry'. I don't think parents understand the difference and that students aren't being taught ethics at all.

² "Course content developed for the pilot would be made available, free of charge, to all interested parties." St. James Ethics Centre (Sept 2009)

³ "Primary Ethics is the owner of the curriculum materials we use. They are an asset that we do not release publicly."
<http://www.primarvethics.com.au/faq.html> Accessed 30/1/12

Some of the initial media information regarding the 'Ethics Course' was misleading. For example the P&C Journal states –“a cross section of faith based groups were consulted⁴” yet it appears only the Uniting Church, Hindu Council of Australia and Australian Federation of Islamic Councils Inc were the supporting faith based groups⁵. (None of these groups are major players in volunteering in Schools through SRE or any other programme – The major denominations that provide SRE were ignored by the St James Ethics Centre contradicting their “wide consultations with Faith groups” claim). I asked about the consultation process at the Ethics workshop at the 2010 P&C Annual conference and no extra faith groups were mentioned as consulted.

Recruitment of Ethics teachers

I am concerned at the recruitment methods of Primary Ethics. While the Primary Ethics website states that the Ethics Course is for those who opt out of SRE, it also suggests sending letters to *all* Yr 5&6 students to register interest for the Ethics Course⁶.

I wonder whether there is much scrutiny of the 'Primary Ethics' organisation. Both the Sydney Morning Herald and NSW P&C Federation appear to endorse without question 'Primary ethics'. It is unclear where the major funding for 'Primary Ethics' is from. In my town the Christian SRE teachers are authorised by both their denomination and the Minister's fraternal. Are there checks and balances with a single private organisation such as Primary Ethics?

⁴ Ethics Pilot Under Attack p14, P&C Journal Term 2, 2010, Vol 61 No 2.

⁵ Uniting Church:- John Oldmeadow, Executive Director Board of Education, Hindu Council of Australia:- Vijai Singhal, Secretary, Australian Federation of Islamic Councils Inc:- Ikebal Patel, President. St. James Ethics Centre (Sept 2009)

⁶ <http://www.primaryethics.com.au/signingup.html> Accessed 30/1/12

Effectiveness:

In my area () there are no 'Ethics courses' running in either of the state primary schools. There are some students in the classes I teach who do not attend Scripture. These students are usually given some work to go on with by their regular teacher. I have no knowledge whether there are parents who have registered interest or volunteers willing to teach Ethics (that information is not made public). In my community I have come across many parents of the students that I teach Scripture. Many of them describe themselves as 'not religious' yet they are very happy for their child to attend Christian Scripture. It appears that the motivation for the Ethics course is city based and has no relevance to country NSW. I cannot see the Ethics course has been particularly effective.

My recommendation is that:

- The Education amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed and a category be made for Atheism to be an instructional base for 'approved Atheism providers'.

Yours Sincerely

Roslyn Deal