

Submission
No 192

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

Name: Mr Jamie Benaud
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The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
Parliament House
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**Submission to
Inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011**

I am a married father one, with my wife currently expecting our second child. Although I am not religious, my wife is a Christian and our children are (and will be) brought up to understand and respect all religions.

I am not opposed to SRE being a part of the public school curriculum, and I attended Anglican SRE myself during my time at primary school. However, I am strongly in favour of parents' right to send their children to a meaningful alternative to SRE should they so choose. Indeed, this should be a fundamental entitlement, but it is an opportunity that was denied to public school students until the introduction of Ethics classes in 2010. Given the close association between ethics and religion, a structured secular ethics class is an ideal alternative to SRE for those students.

As survey after survey has revealed, the Ethics classes are a successful and extremely popular alternative to the non-scripture "waste of time" which was the only option previously available.

According to the 2006 Australian Census¹, 18.7% of Australians list themselves as being of "No Religion". Until the introduction of Ethics classes in 2010, these children were offered no alternative while the remaining students attended SRE. Indeed, they were expressly forbidden from undertaking any structured learning during SRE periods. Surely, this is not a situation that should be inflicted on children again?

I followed with great interest the trials of the Ethics classes and was heartened by the overwhelmingly positive response of those who participated, and by the professionalism that was apparent in the construction of the course. I have watched the online videos provided by the St James Ethics Centre, and monitored the websites of both St James and Primary Ethics to keep abreast of the status of the courses. I am very satisfied with the course content, and look forward to my children being able to attend the classes when they enter the public school system in the future.

Aside from the potential discrimination against those who do not attend SRE, it disturbs me that many of those who are critical of the Ethics classes are apparently unwilling to subject SRE to the same standards which are met by the ethics course. SRE has no official curriculum, no content monitoring and no background checks of teachers. All things that should be a requirement of any course being delivered in public schools, particularly when it is often being delivered by people with no formal training in education. I cannot see how one can criticise the Ethics curriculum, while advocating an 'alternative' (be it SRE or non-scripture) which has no curriculum at all.

Both the Liberal-National Coalition and the Australian Labor Party went to the 2011 State election promising to continue ethics classes as an alternative to SRE. As such, the classes have a mandate from the vast majority of voters in the State. Aside from the public opinion, the federation of P&C Associations and all major religious groups in NSW have now given public support to the retention of ethics classes, including the Anglican, Catholic and Uniting Churches and major Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist faiths.^{2, 3, 4, 5}

I look forward to this committee accepting the will of the citizens of NSW, and ensuring that children who opt-out of SRE are not disadvantaged and can instead continue to receive some meaningful education in the form of secular ethics classes.

Your Sincerely,

Jamie Benaud

References:

1. 2006 Census Data, Australian Bureau of Statistics.
Shortlink: <http://bit.ly/2006religion>
2. David Giblin, Federation of P&C Associations. (SMH 1 August 2011)
Shortlink: <http://bit.ly/ethics-PandC>
3. Dr Bryan Cowling, Anglican Education Office, Mr Jude Hennessy, Catholic Education Office. (SMH 21 July 2011)
Shortlink: <http://bit.ly/ethics-sre>
4. Uniting Church in Australia Supports ethics classes. (Press Release)
Shortlink: <http://bit.ly/ethics-unit>
5. Bhante Sujato, Abbott of the Santi Forest Buddhist Monastery. (Blog)
Shortlink: <http://bit.ly/ethics-budd>