

Submission  
No 168

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

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Partially Confidential

## Submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 regarding inquiry into Ethics Classes

I ask the committee to support the continuation of ethics classes as an alternative to special religious education (SRE) in NSW schools.

### My background

I am the current ethics co-ordinator for \_\_\_\_\_ Last year, I volunteered as an ethics teacher at the school, and taught a class of 22 Year 5 students.

\_\_\_\_\_ is one of the largest primary schools in New South Wales, with around 1000 students, most of whom come from non-English speaking backgrounds. From my observations and feedback from school staff, close to half of the students attend non-scripture.

I am also a parent of two children, one of whom attends \_\_\_\_\_

In my professional life, I worked as a lawyer for several years but have recently finished a teaching degree. I am currently working as a full time high school science teacher.

### Objectives, curriculum, implementation and effectiveness of ethics course

I am not sure that I could capture the richness of what happened in my ethics class last year in a few pages, but I will try.

Basically, as the teacher, I facilitated discussion among the students, by providing the topics for class and questions to develop the students' thinking and discussion. Primary Ethics provided a written curriculum outlining the topics and questions. Topics were varied and relevant to children's interests, ranging from youth homelessness to the treatment of animals.

However, the structure of the class, being a community of inquiry, was intended to provide student-centred learning, where the children had as much input into the direction of the class by way of the questions they asked and the opinions they ventured. The structure of the class meant that class discussion was more extensive than the curriculum and questions provided, rather than confined by it.

Apart from providing the topics and guiding questions, I saw my role as encouraging a safe and friendly learning environment where all students were encouraged to contribute to discussion and listened to each other thoughtfully and respectfully. I also used questioning or prompting to develop students' reasoning skills, depth of thought and consideration of issues which they might have overlooked. These skills were also built into the curriculum, so my facilitation just extended the approach to flexibly respond to the students' contributions.

Because of the richness of the curriculum which was actually lived by the students in ethics class, it is complex to describe what each student learned. Ethics was not about dictating a set of values to students or telling them *what* to think. Rather, it was about guiding them in *how* to think, and examine other ideas as well as their own.

This did not mean that the ethics course was value neutral. A key value encouraged was to critically examine the reasons behind moral decisions - not just acting a certain way because others did or because it was convenient or beneficial to one person. Recurring questions the curriculum suggested, and I asked to students, were:

- What are the arguments leading to the conclusion? Do they follow logically?



- What evidence was there to support each of the arguments for the decision? (For example, what evidence have you seen to support the common belief that homeless people are old men?)
- What are the consequences? Who could be affected by the decision? (For example, many people copy music illegally. What would happen if everybody did it? How would this affect musicians?)
- What are the principles or “rules” behind the decision? What would happen if these rules were applied to a more serious situation or generalised? (For example, you might lend money to a friend who asked for some, knowing they had a junk food addiction and they would probably use it to buy junk food. But would you do the same if they had a drug addiction?)

Students’ viewpoints were discussed openly and closely scrutinised by their peers, who did not always agree. Part of my role was to encourage students to respectfully but critically explore differences in opinion, in order to develop a more reasoned moral framework for themselves.

Ethics class also encouraged students to be more willing to listen to each other and more thoughtful, open-minded, objective and courageous in examining the facts and assumptions behind their reasoning with other students. I saw results as some students became more patient listeners and quieter students became willing to venture their opinions. In other words, the class structure facilitated the values of being inclusive, open to and respectful of everyone.

I believe that giving the students the opportunity to contemplate serious issues - many of which would also generate a variety of opinions among adults - also communicated to students that they were worthy of being trusted to think, rather than morally or logically deficient. My experience was that most students were clearly capable of thinking about the issues being presented in class with guidance, with a few students contributing extremely eloquent and well considered opinions. Being trusted with the opportunity to discuss important moral questions excited the students. Feedback from classroom teachers was that my ethics students often went back to their normal class after ethics still talking about topics we have discussed.

## **Inclusiveness outside class**

Inclusiveness, openness and respect extended to parents. Following a suggestion from Primary Ethics given at my training, I encouraged students to discuss class topics with their parents, so that their parents could find out what they were learning, as well as give any input on the topics themselves. Feedback from my class indicated that their parents did not have much more to add to the issues in addition to what had been explored in class. I have not received any complaints from any student’s parent, nor any request for further information about the course from them.

I have observed inclusiveness in Primary Ethics demonstrated in its involvement of people from many diverse backgrounds, and consequently broaden the students’ experiences. For example, during a topic on Homelessness, a young staff member of The Salvation Army Oasis program who had previously experienced homelessness herself visited ethics class at one school, and a video of her conversation with the class was made available for other ethics classes, including my own. Other volunteers whom I have met also come from diverse backgrounds. For example, I have been to a Primary Ethics training session given by a Catholic. Some ethics teachers I have met hold Buddhist beliefs. Others hold no religious views.

## **Evidence supporting the approach of ethics class**

The teaching methods of Primary Ethics encourage student-centred, open-ended and challenging learning, as well as communicating high expectations of students as to their ability to make well-considered moral decisions.



There is an abundance of research supporting such features in effecting teaching and learning in mainstream school education, for example in relation to the New South Wales Quality Teaching Framework or the Queensland Productive Pedagogies model.

## Teachers and training

I was required to attend two full days' training to learn how to facilitate ethics classes and explore the curriculum topics with students. I understand all ethics teachers must do the same. Primary Ethics has also provided ongoing training in class management, as well as new topic areas, together with a growing number of supporting resources to help ethics teachers with their teaching. Over time, these initiatives should ensure the quality of ethics teachers will continue improving.

The only issue with ethics at [redacted] is a shortage of volunteers who have the English skills, facilitation skills, confidence and the time to meet the existing demand for ethics classes. However, I have seen the number of schools and volunteers in the surrounding areas grow over the year, and the phenomenal effort Primary Ethics has put into supporting and training volunteers, so I am confident that over time this will cease to be an issue.

## Fairness and benefits in retaining ethics as an option during SRE

One of the initial objectives of ethics was to provide an option for non-scripture students. That a whole class of ethics students could be drawn from just one grade at [redacted] demonstrated that ethics was relevant and in demand at the school. Student numbers for this year are still being finalised, but initial feedback from the school's SRE co-ordinator is that there would be enough demand for more than one class.

Ethics does not take anything away from any other family at the school. Families who want their children to attend SRE still have SRE, only now they have the luxury of another option as well. It would be possible for families to alternate between SRE and ethics options from year to year. In any case, verbal feedback from the school indicated that most ethics students were from non-scripture.

Families and students who choose ethics do so of their own free will. During my training, there was a suggestion that we ensure students wanted to be in our classes, and to encourage them to talk it over with their parents if they felt the class was not for them after trying the classes out. Given the increasing number of students enrolling in ethics, it could be assumed that families regard ethics as more beneficial than doing something to fill in time at school, such as homework or reading, during non-scripture.

Ethics class is also potentially beneficial to our society as a whole compared to non-scripture. Non-scripture children do not learn anything about moral thinking or how to live in our society while they are sitting in non-scripture. They also do not live in a moral vacuum - they will still learn values from their families, their communities, mass media and a myriad of other sources which schools and the government have little control over. By contrast, the current ethics curriculum has actually been approved by the NSW Department of Education. Ethics provides an important opportunity to bring different views together for examination, with appropriate teacher guidance. It is hard to see how ethics could result in a less harmonious society, compared to not providing such a learning opportunity in schools at all.

Ethics classes do not cost NSW taxpayers anything. Nor do the potential benefits of ethics class require more time and commitment from school teachers. On the other hand, instruction about religious beliefs is already part of the mainstream school curriculum, with teachers expected to teach it. My child spent a term studying religious beliefs of the world in Year 3 last year. By contrast, formal teaching on secular ethics and philosophy has not been part of my child's mainstream school curriculum.

I ask that ethics continue to be permitted and supported in NSW schools as an alternative option to SRE. The only other fair and logical alternative would be to remove SRE and ethics altogether from the school timetable, then formally include both comparative religious studies as well as ethics and secular philosophy as part of the mainstream school curriculum. However, this places more burden on teachers and schools and removes the opportunity for motivated organisations like Primary Ethics and individuals to contribute to school communities.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Pan  
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