

Submission
No 310

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

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 28/02/2012

Partially Confidential

General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 (GPSC No 2)

NSW Parliament House, Macquarie Street,

Sydney 2000

www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees

strictly confidential

28 February 2012

fax given: 9230 2876

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re : Repeal of the ALP-Green Ethics Course Bill or Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010

I ask for the repeal of the ALP-Green Ethics Course Bill or Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010.

I have always been, and am still, in full support of Special Religious Education (Scripture) Classes in all State schools. I have been an Anglican scripture helper and teacher at state public schools in my local community for about 4 years. Although I have helped and taught a variety of classes on occasion, I have predominantly taught and helped with Kindergarten and Grade 1. This submission is therefore predominantly written from a primary and infants schools perspective, although I would like to make it clear that I am in full support for SRE in all state schools including secondary school.

I am also in support of providing suitable alternative learning material and activities for non-scripture children in a classroom environment, to help maintain their routine learning and to provide revision and consolidation of their current curriculum learning, and to further enhance their ability.

My submission proposes 5 initial recommendations in Section 2, and describes a number of further concerns regarding 'special education in ethics' in State schools in Section 3.

I would appreciate acknowledgement of the receipt of my submission, and appreciate any further information in response to my recommendations in the future.

1.Introduction

I feel there is a need for official recognition and acknowledgement of the teaching of ethics, that is already occurring in our public schools, whether formally or informally, both by the professionally qualified classroom teachers and by other relevant school staff and SRE (scripture) teachers. This is not well identified nor understood and there is much potential for relevant and appropriate further development.

Ethics is originally birthed within our Christian Faith Heritage, even since God's laws and commandments, principally based loving God with all our heart, and loving one another as ourself, providing a clear framework for our relationships and communities. It is inherent to our identity. It is my understanding that secular ethics denies the existence and even the possibility of the existence of God. However, this is not a time to teach children, particularly at younger ages, about ethical issues and making decisions severed from their identity as a whole person, including spiritually, nor from the wisdom and teaching embedded in everyday school classrooms by professionally trained and experienced teachers.

A number of my recommendations are based on working with the approved programmes that already exist, the Department of Education Teachers and SRE Teachers. To detach ethics from either of these sources (particularly in my view from a Christian faith tradition) takes it out of the approved and best context in which it can be potentially best learnt, developed, and kept accountable. Both education and SRE programmes (for example Anglican Scripture) have proven to be successful long-term, and include professional organisations for training and accreditation of teachers (whether a SRE Teacher is a qualified Department of Education Teacher or not).

The development of ethics and related skills seem to predominantly occur, particularly at the early learning stages, in simple classroom interaction and even in the playground. Of course, it might, at times, be learnt or taught indirectly, even by observation or through a story, or thinking through responses to questions and scenarios, or by discovery etc. and it might be difficult to represent well in a written curriculum, in particular being able to reflect all such learning, that might potentially result from social interaction and a group learning activity, for example.

Ethics is fundamentally inherent to relationship. The classroom teachers would have developed good rapport and relationship with the children, and the SRE teachers and helpers have also often established further relationship links in a broader community context through their church, school functions, programmes and assemblies, including Christmas carol night, helping in reading programmes, a church community fete, weekly kids clubs after school, food collections for the needy etc. The impact and importance of the relationships established are therefore extended within the broader community and should not be underestimated nor undervalued, just because it cannot be adequately measured or represented on paper or in a standard educational curriculum. SRE therefore serves to provide a means of belonging, identity, safety and even security, in both the school and broader community. Therefore, the relationship is much more than a weekly lesson of SRE, there is significant community presence (whether identified or associated as help, fellowship etc.). I trust that this presence is appreciated and kept in mind, and helps in understanding a strong recommendation and preference to work with the existing successful programmes of the DET school curriculum and the SRE curriculum/communities.

2. Recommendations

(i) Review and further resource, where appropriate, SRE training and curriculum with respect to making ethics more officially and explicitly presented.

This is an opportunity to review the SRE curriculum and appropriately and effectively, in accordance with the faith and/or Bible, make ethics more officially and explicitly presented and resourced. This might include more training and teaching resources depending on the year or grade.

This is also a prime opportunity to build and enrich the lessons taught to children of all faiths and scripture, particularly the monotheistic faiths.

Ethics is fundamentally inherent to scripture, including how we learn from and respond to God and other people and people groups in the Christian Bible, in a variety of contexts and times in history. We learn from the choices and behaviour of other people, how those choices, or why those choices, were or might've been made – and reflect on the true motivation. In addition, we have a real and perfect model, God, and Jesus Christ, the latter, more relatable to children, and the Holy Spirit helps and guides us in seeking the truth.

Nearly all mainstream religions, although different, are co-operative and unite in terms of love and belief and worship of God and love for mankind. In my view, these are essential principles for healthy

relationships and sense of self. There is an understanding that the source of wisdom and decision making is in a higher power and being (who we can depend on, model ourselves, receive help, find comfort etc.) for if all was left to ourselves and everyone did what was considered right in their own eyes, then human nature would inevitably "self-destruct" as humanity struggles and competes and vies for power etc. In fact, as history shows, God and God's people discovered that fact early on - hence the gift of the law, including the 10 commandments, the very essence being to love God and love one another as oneself.

A number of ethics subjects, have been and are available for study at professionally accredited religious organisations and bible colleges, whether Christian Ethics, Old Testament Ethics, New Testament Ethics, Ethics in Christian Education etc. This could be considered in the review for further training. Such material, however, would need to be more appropriately (age appropriate), explicitly and very carefully incorporated into the SRE curriculum, particularly for older children.

(ii) Review and develop a Secondary or High School Preparation Programme for Year 6.

This could be an opportunity to develop a very comprehensive and holistic high school preparation programme for Year 6, which could be offered weekly or fortnightly. Although predominantly an education programme, I would envisage it would benefit from the involvement, input and participation of appropriate accredited youth organisations, church and/or church welfare organisations or similar, parental input, pastoral carers, counsellors and/or psychologists. (It may or may not include Year 5). I would envisage it would be very relational by nature, providing plenty of discussions and opportunity, and perhaps suitable mentoring.

Such a programme could include testimonies from other children, providing a safe place for children to share their concerns, hopes, fears, needs, supports, and any other difficult issues. Topics could include: how to say no; understanding of main life transitions and growing in freedom and learning about the responsibility of that freedom; developing confidence, valuing honesty; communicating without fear of hurting others' feelings; self-respect, care and love; how to ask for help; what is a good friend?; What is peer pressure? ; the importance of communication with parents and/or adults. Appropriate scenarios or classroom situations could be offered – Do you follow the crowd? How would you stand up? When and how appropriately?

Such a programme would be an important or not a vital responsibility and duty of care, for nurturing our children including Year 6 to middle school.

(iii) Make provision for consistent classroom environment learning, across the school, for scripture and non-scripture.

The opportunity to realign scripture with non-scripture, in terms of maintaining a classroom learning environment for all children, and providing appropriate learning materials for all children across the school. In Anglican scripture, learning is structured, each child is given a workbook for their learning activities and for revision of the lesson material. The Department of Education can provide or recommend workbooks or booklets of worksheets (that could tear out and be given to the child) of various topics, suitable for classroom learning for non-scripture children.

Also, there are already other learning programmes in place that could be further developed, including for example, the Premier's reading challenge etc.

More consistent and meaningful alternative activities might include: homework; reading program; numeracy or literacy review or worksheets; puzzle sheets; and problem solving sheets.

The Department of Education could provide and/or recommend resources and work books or sheets for the classroom teachers for different topics, already prepared, so it is not too labour-intensive for them, is of a similar nature to their existing classroom work and that used in SRE or scripture. As long as the teachers are paid for that time, there are appropriate prepared resources available, effective learning is taking place, maintaining of a routine classroom environment and authority of the teachers, and no child is specifically excluded from classroom learning, in particular the weekly set DET curriculum.

(iv) Review of the Department of Education Curriculum and Teacher training to ensure official recognition given to the teaching, modelling and managing of ethics in classroom and playground learning and interaction, in an explicitly values-based curriculum and education system.

Ethics should be explicitly obvious in a values education system, and if not, then the Department of Education needs to make Aussie Christian values, our heritage, very clearly the basis of ethical skills development within the classroom and in our education curriculum. Ethics is not something that should be added on separately from mainstream classroom teaching and scripture. It is already being taught, but there is scope for further development. The Department of Education and the appropriate Churches and Religious Organisations can develop better training and lesson material, and official recognition of ethics in their approved curriculums, including competence.

I would think classroom teachers would be 'generally acceptable' facilitators for administering 'ethics' in everyday teaching and classroom interaction, because public school teachers do not need to be, nor profess to be, of a particular faith and therefore, in that sense, are somewhat independent of any particular faith or scripture. There also seems already, and should be, a clear framework of accountability and sense of community.

(v) I am sure both the DET and SRE Programmes would benefit from better support, research and more funding, and therefore recommend an application for the government's financial assistance, particularly for further development of the SRE curriculum, to ensure the best quality for the kids.

3. Some Serious Concerns about 'secular ethics' classes (further to the Introduction).

(i) Some professional concerns

What training is provided and required for ethics teachers? Who is teaching ethics? Is there a minimum requirement for accreditation of ethics teachers? Is there accountability of the ethics teachers to or within a community in which there is a clear, well understood and agreed mission and belief or creed or statement of values? Is this well known and/or understood by parents and the community? Is there a set curriculum or can it be largely determined by a particular parent's views? Is there a facility or any intent of facilitating observation of ethics teachers? What level of transparency is there? How accessible is their material and curriculum to the community and public?

All of this is available in the current SRE Programme, in particular the Anglican Diocese to my knowledge and experience, and in a different way in the Department of Education.

(ii) Emotional and Psychological concerns

Age appropriateness is important. If it is all up to children's own little minds and capabilities, only in their own human strength, and there is no hope of anything greater than themselves, then this could very well lead to a tremendous pressure and struggle with themselves, particularly when so young, as they can't trust or hope in anything greater outside of themselves. This could be a dangerous consequence for our young souls and minds, particularly when children these days are so often subjected to so many adult issues and non-normal and diverse relationships and behaviours. There is the danger of depression and segregation of their whole person and their potential. It may add more stress, particularly at the younger ages, if they have to make certain decisions. I believe young kids should not have to worry so much, they should be able to dream their dreams, learn, have fun, trust God, have faith, and open or free up their potential.

(In Anglican SRE, responsibility, free will, accountability, thinking for yourself, seeking the best decisions within a biblical framework, is taught.)

(iii) Identity Concerns

Secular ethics is not truly and inherently holistic, rooted in relationship and belonging, as a whole person, whereas the child's sense of belonging and identity can be obtained within their faith community, in the classroom, links to church groups and in a broader context belonging to the family of God etc. Secular ethics should not be an opportunity to fragment, pull apart and isolate ethics from a person's whole being and identity, including their spiritual identity.

My understanding is that secular ethics denies the existence and even the possibility of the existence of God. It denies that we are spiritual beings. It denies and robs the opportunity of hope, the wonder and confidence that can come from knowing and learning about a creative God and Spirit, and in learning that they themselves are creative beings.

(iv) Community and Transparency Concerns

A denomination's or faith tradition's main belief declaration or creedal elements are typically clear and are often rather easily accessible and well known by the community and public. There is a general knowledge and openness of basically what will be taught in SRE, such as in Anglican Scripture. However, the separate secular ethics classes seem rather less transparent and somewhat dangerous in that respect. The ethics lessons intended to be taught are atheistic by nature based on a statement of unbelief.

Even if there is a statement that there is no belief in a God and therefore it seems safe to some people being purely humanistic or apparently being separate from a faith or God, it could still in fact be a religion, in the sense of having and teaching a particular worldview. This worldview needs to be very well identified, analysed and publically acknowledged and generally accessible to the public, broader community and school. There needs to be transparency, openness, accountability and clarity. Secular ethics classes possibly seems more open to the influence of an individual teacher's or parent's personal worldview which might not be helpful.

I would think public school classroom teachers would be 'generally acceptable' facilitators for administering 'ethics' in everyday teaching and classroom interaction, because they do not need to profess nor deny a particular faith and in that sense, are somewhat independent. Furthermore, at least

the classroom teacher doesn't or is hopefully likely not to deny the existence of God nor fully erode or eliminate spirituality, if a student asks or is seeking.

Is there a statement of belief or unbelief, which is clearly accessible and well known by the community? Is it open to any belief as long as it doesn't ascribe to any higher power to whom we need to be accountable and from whom we derive our help and hope? What is the accountability and authority in ethics? Perhaps consider a review of accountability and authority across all SRE and Ethics. The special education of ethics classes seem to be about a collection of individuals well defined by individualism or separateness. They don't really seem community based nor do they provide an encouraging identity, a belonging, hope, etc.

Conclusion

I propose to address the need for teaching ethics, by the formal recognition of ethics that is already being taught, whether formally and informally, and by working with the existing programmes and communities of DET and SRE, that have already been successfully in place long term. Ethics can be further developed within an explicitly values-based state education system, and within a holistic person identity including spirituality (humans being spiritual beings) within SRE. I therefore repeal and oppose the separate addition of atheistic ethics classes and strongly recommend instead, further curriculum and resource development with the existing DET and SRE system, with the DET curriculum in state schools being based on our Aussie Christian Heritage values, and the consideration of our existing 'independent' state school qualified and experienced teachers as appropriate facilitators, given that such ethic skills development are already taking place in the classroom and playground environments. Further teacher training can be reviewed. I would like to make it clear however, that SRE teachers must be practicing believers of their faith tradition.