

**Submission
No 381**

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

Name: Ms Catherine Suttle

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The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

To: The Hon Maria Ficarra

Re: Inquiry to Investigate Ethics Classes

I support ethics classes as an option for children who do not attend scripture classes. I was schooled in England, so had no experience of the special religious education (SRE) system in place in NSW. When my first child entered primary school five years ago, I was most unpleasantly surprised to find that I had to choose a religion so that he could attend a weekly session with a volunteer from that religious body. I took the option for him not to attend these, because I do not want him to be indoctrinated; I would like to allow him to make up his own mind when he is ready to do so.

When my son started coming home with stories of watching videos during this school period, I complained to the Principal, who explained that she had no control over this part of the school curriculum, and that her hands were tied by Department of Education policy. Of course, she was right. The Department was preventing my child and many others in this state from participating in learning activities during this weekly period, in a public school. This was an outrageous situation.

In 2010, I was very happy to see legislation passed to allow ethics classes to sit alongside scripture classes in the NSW curriculum as an option for children not attending scripture. This ended many years of discrimination against children from families without religion, and those whose family's faith is not included in the scripture program at their school.

I now coordinate ethics classes in our school. I am very impressed with the system of ethics teacher recruitment and training, curriculum development and program administration provided by Primary Ethics. I am very proud of the dedication and excellent teaching by our four ethics teachers.

Last year, when Fred Nile questioned the quality of and need for ethics classes, many parents were enormously disappointed at this attempt to disrupt and derail the classes. It was one of our own ethics class students who put this disappointment into words which were published on August 1st

(<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/keep-your-politics-out-of-our-classrooms-mr-nile-2011-0801-1i77c.html>). He asked the Reverend Nile to think again and invited him to attend one of

our ethics classes. Unfortunately he has not taken up this invitation.

Scrutiny of any aspect of the school curriculum should be welcomed. It is disconcerting, however, that ethics classes are to be investigated only one year after they were formally evaluated and introduced, while their sister classes, SRE, have *never* been subject to formal scrutiny since they were introduced about 150 years ago. No justification for this selective scrutiny has been provided. SRE classes should be examined alongside ethics classes.

A possible outcome of the current inquiry is of course that ethics classes are no longer made available to our children during the period set aside for SRE. At our school, about half of the children in years 5 and 6 have opted to attend ethics classes. Withdrawal of ethics classes would thus leave a significant gap in the curriculum for those children, who would have to go back to a lack of learning during the scripture period.

I am also very concerned that the NSW government intends to provide an annual celebration of SRE classes to acknowledge the efforts of volunteers in that program. Ethics class volunteers appear to have been excluded from this celebration. I find this discriminatory and entirely misguided. At our school, the community is mutually supportive; our Principal holds an annual morning tea within the school to acknowledge the enormous contributions made by all volunteer parents and other community members to programs such as the school band, SRE, ethics, fundraising and school sports events. No particular groups within that body of volunteers are made to feel especially valued. Appreciation is shown to all. The idea of celebrating one group to the exclusion of others reflects a poor understanding of school communities.

I support ethics classes as an alternative to SRE classes. I submit that the Committee of Inquiry should:

- Recommend that ethics classes are maintained as an option for children not attending SRE classes.
- Submit SRE classes to the same degree of scrutiny as ethics classes
- Recommend that in the interests of equity and good relations within school communities, the celebration of SRE classes be withdrawn; alternatively that all volunteer-run programs in the public school system are celebrated in parallel.

Catherine Suttle