

**Submission  
No 123**

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

**Organisation:** Darlinghurst Public School Parents and Citizen's Association  
**Date received:** 9/02/2012

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## SUBMISSION

From: P&C, Darlinghurst Public School  
To: General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2  
Re: Legislative Council Inquiry into the *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011*

### Summary of Submission

1. The Parents' and Citizens' Association of Darlinghurst Public School supports the continuation of Special Education in Ethics in public education and opposes the repeal of the legislation setting up those classes as proposed in the *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011* ("the Bill").

### Ethics Classes At Darlinghurst Public School

2. Darlinghurst Public School ("DPS") is a small (around 200 pupils) K-6 school attended by a broad range of students, both culturally and socio-economically, with 43% of students having a language background other than English.<sup>1</sup>
3. The P&C of DPS approved the school's participation in Ethics in 2009. After seeking to be included, DPS was one of the ten schools involved in the trial of Ethics classes in 2010. Some fifteen students from years 5 and 6 undertook the trial course.
4. DPS participated in the evaluation of the Ethics trial in 2010 and those responsible for administering and teaching the Course have considered the report of Dr Sue Knight and her comments and research.<sup>2</sup>
5. On the Government of NSW legislating to provide for Ethics Classes by way of amendment to the *Education Act* in late 2010, a volunteer parent undertook the training course and an Ethics Co-Ordinator, another volunteer parent, was appointed.
6. Again, around 15 students opted into the Ethics course at DPS. The course has had the support of the Principal and the teaching staff, and has had a room allocated for regular lessons.
7. The lessons take place at the same time as Special Religious Education classes ("SRE"). Ethics is offered to children who opt out of SRE. There has been very little

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<sup>1</sup> See My School website, "Students 2010",  
[http://www.myschool.edu.au/MainPages/SchoolProfileRep.aspx?SDRSchoolId=1100530\\_7414&DEEWRIId=5327&CalendarYear=2010&RefId=%2bppdw9X%2f9lIB9LJ88dRQQY3Xn9HHZgEx](http://www.myschool.edu.au/MainPages/SchoolProfileRep.aspx?SDRSchoolId=1100530_7414&DEEWRIId=5327&CalendarYear=2010&RefId=%2bppdw9X%2f9lIB9LJ88dRQQY3Xn9HHZgEx)

<sup>2</sup> "NSW Ethics Course Trial, Final Report",  
[https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/detresources/Ethics\\_Evaluation\\_Final\\_Report\\_11112010\\_HQssrhmwpK.pdf](https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/detresources/Ethics_Evaluation_Final_Report_11112010_HQssrhmwpK.pdf)

change in the number of children whose parents choose for them to take classes in SRE. The Ethics classes, however, provide an option for those children whose parents prefer them not to undertake religious education at school.

8. The P&C considers that providing an option of active education with a non-religious focus is an appropriate use of the time otherwise set aside for SRE. As DPS is necessarily a secular educational institution, and every child has the right to opt out of SRE, provision of a useful educational alternative is clearly a better option than the "quiet study" option so often observed in the breach.

#### Impressions of the Ethics Curriculum

9. Those who have taught, administered and observed the course are unanimous that it provides a basis for children to learn sound communication techniques, such as how to disagree with someone without being aggressive or by engaging in put-downs. Instead, the course encourages exploration of ideas, allowing the children to see various sides of other people's views on issues such as truth and lying, ethical treatment of animals, "what is a good life?" and graffiti.
10. The feedback from the year 5/6 teacher for the 2011 year was universally positive. The feedback was that the children came back from the Ethics classes wanting to continue discussion of the issues, and the teacher made an attempt to incorporate the Ethics topics in the learning for the day so that the children remained engaged and built on the discussions had earlier during Ethics.
11. The children too were excited by the topics discussed. They were able to grow and develop their arguments in a mature way, and to listen to the opinions of those with whom they disagreed, sometimes modifying or even changing their original views.
12. One outstanding success from the trial in 2010 was a child who was essentially non-verbal, but who was able to express his ideas on topics during the ethics classes. The observations of this child, and of the students generally, support the reported observation of Dr Knight at page 80 of her evaluation that "special needs children, with Asperger's' syndrome or autism, were benefiting from the ethics course by interacting socially within the ethics group at levels not seen before".

#### Ethics or Values?

13. Some concern has been expressed that the course does involve a definitive "right or wrong" aspect and that the teacher/facilitator does not emphasize the "right" action out of the various scenarios placed before the children. The P&C of DPS does not consider this a valid concern, on the following bases:-

- (a) Firstly, values education is very prominent in primary school education. The school newsletter highlights the "Values of the week" such as integrity, responsibility and co-operation<sup>3</sup> and values education is enshrined in Department of Education policy.<sup>4</sup> It is not the case that the school experience is "value-free", and in fact the children bring their own values and those learned in school to the discussion of topics in Ethics.
- (b) Secondly, the skills learned in Ethics classes enable children to examine in a critical way the ethical dilemmas placed before them and to evaluate the possible resolutions and implications against their own inherent and learned ethical standpoints. It is demeaning to the intelligence of children to say that because they are not actively being told what is right and what is wrong that they are unable to form their own views. Similarly, it is simplistic to say that "nothing is right and nothing is wrong; therefore, human beings can be killed without any embarrassment or reservation".<sup>5</sup> The course is an exploration of attitudes to simple (and sometimes not so simple) examples of real life; to say that the thoughtful approaches brought to it by the children and the teachers trained in facilitation of discussion would lead to unthinking murder is unhelpful to say the least.
- (c) Thirdly, the parents and carers of DPS, who make the decision for their children whether to take Special Religious Education, Special Education in Ethics or the "nothing" option, are well informed about their choices. It can be seen that a substantial percentage of parents of children in years 5 and 6 have taken the choice of Ethics rather than SRE (or "doing nothing"). It is an informed choice, taken from a position of understanding the way in which it is taught and the valuable lessons gained from it, contrary to the assertions in the Second Reading Speech that parents "did not understand" the contents and intent of the course.<sup>6</sup>

#### Community Support and Involvement

14. Despite the small size of DPS, the course has been popular amongst the students and has been well-supported by the community. Both parents and members of the

<sup>3</sup> As an example only: see Term 3 Week 4 newsletter  
[http://www.darlinghurst-](http://www.darlinghurst.schools.nsw.edu.au/cmsresources/misc//2010_term_3_week_4_newsletter_1318224257439.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [p.schools.nsw.edu.au/cmsresources/misc//2010\\_term\\_3\\_week\\_4\\_newsletter\\_1318224257439.pdf](https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_serv/student_welfare/valu_scool/PD20050131.shtml)  
[https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student\\_serv/student\\_welfare/valu\\_scool/PD20050131.shtml](https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_serv/student_welfare/valu_scool/PD20050131.shtml)

<sup>5</sup> Hon Rev. Fred Nile: Second Reading Speech, *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011*  
 p 20

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

wider community have volunteered to be involved in teaching it, despite the significant time commitment it entails.<sup>7</sup>

#### Conclusion

15. The parents, carers, students and members of the wider community of Darlinghurst Public School support the continued teaching of Ethics to years 5 and 6, and the extension planned for later in 2012 of the curriculum to years 3 and 4. They oppose the repeal of the 2010 amendments to the *Education Act* which put Ethics alongside the teaching of religion in public schools, and call for this Inquiry to recommend that the Bill not be passed.
16. The President and members of the P&C, together with members of the staff of DPS, are willing and available to give evidence before the Committee of Inquiry should there be questions arising out of the DPS experience with Ethics classes.

Ben Pearson

President

Darlinghurst Public School P&C

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<sup>7</sup> a rigorous screening and interview process; two full days for training; half-an-hour per week of face-to-face teaching, plus preparation; and a minimum commitment of teaching for one year.