

**Submission  
No 228**

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

**Organisation:** Mosman Public School Ethics Team

**Date received:** 24/02/2012

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**Submission to the Inquiry into  
Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011  
from  
Mosman Public School Ethics Team**

**1. Introduction**

The repeal of the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 as proposed by Hon Fred Nile would return NSW state schools to a situation in which children opting out of Special Religious Education are given nothing meaningful to do. Such a situation would discriminate against those children, and be entirely unacceptable to thousands of parents, children and other members of the NSW community.

This submission urges that the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 not be repealed. It outlines the success of the Ethics Program at Mosman Public School (MPS) on Sydney's Lower North Shore, and its strong support from the School, the P&C, the parents and the children.

**2. About MPS**

MPS was founded in 1880 with 54 students regularly attending classes. By the turn of the century, enrolments had reached 304 students. Today around 700 children attend MPS. It is one of the largest primary schools in the state and highly regarded for its well-balanced, integrated curriculum and the enrichment of students through activities such as music, art, physical education and sport.

MPS has a very active P&C and enjoys strong support from its parent body, as well as the broader local community.

**3. Ethics classes at MPS**

**One of highest take-ups in the State**

Due to strong demand, MPS implemented ethics classes as soon as the ethics curriculum was available. The strength of support from parents is evidenced by the fact that MPS had one of the earliest and highest take-ups of the ethics classes in the state. It was one of the few schools in NSW to have three ethics classes in 2010.

The program began in February 2010 with two ethics classes and a waiting list of children wanting to join the program. This was accommodated by a third class, introduced in second term. A total of 58 children from Years 5 and 6 attended ethics classes throughout 2010. A key motivation for parents was the desire for their children to have a meaningful alternative to being 'parked' in non-scripture.

## **Increased take-up in 2012**

Nearly all the children who attended ethics classes in 2011 have opted to continue in 2012. The total number of Year 5 and 6 children attending the program has increased from 58 in 2010 to potentially around 70 -80 children in 2012. Two additional ethics teachers are being trained and MPS will have five ethics teachers in addition to an ethics coordinator, bringing the current MPS ethics team to six people.

## **4. MPS and P&C support**

On 28 October 2010 MPS P&C passed a resolution asking that

*“the NSW Minister for Education changes DET’s policy to allow secular ethics classes to be offered as an option for children who opt out of scripture/SRE classes in NSW primary schools.”*

This support continues and the Ethics program also has the support of the school Executive.

When it seemed in mid 2011 that Ethics classes had an uncertain future with Hon Fred Nile threatening to withdraw support for Government legislation unless the Ethics Classes amendment to the Education Act was repealed, the backlash from parents and the general community was overwhelming.

Attached is an article from the Mosman Daily published on 10 August 2011 reporting on MPS parent concern about the threat to Ethics classes.

## **5. Feedback on the Ethics classes**

### **Feedback from participating children**

Feedback from the children attending MPS Ethics classes has been overwhelming positive. Typical comments from the children at evaluation sessions include:

*“Ethics classes let you have a say in things you feel strongly about”*

*“It’s nice to talk about issues you may not talk about at school otherwise”*

*“The classes give you different ideas about your rights and what you’re allowed to do”*

*“Ethics classes give you a chance to express your opinion”*

*“Ethics classes teach you to think”*

*“The classes give us a chance to talk about what’s right and what’s wrong”*

*“It’s good to be able to debate ideas rather than just be told”*

*“ Sometimes we would argue about things, but there is nothing wrong with a good argument!”*

### **Feedback from Ethics Teachers**

Feedback from the volunteers teaching Ethics at MPS underlines the positive response received from the participating students.

*“I don’t think this is an easy class for the students. They don’t have the chance to be passive – we require them to really think and to contribute. This fact makes it particularly gratifying to me that my students are so keen to attend in preference to a ‘do nothing’ alternative.”*

Stephen Bingham, MPS Ethics Teacher

*“From the perspective of a teacher of the Primary Ethics course, the experience has been fabulous. The curriculum is immediately engaging for children as the topics for discussion have been tailored to reflect ethical choices that resonate deeply with kids.*

*All children can empathise with the difficult decisions that are required when a favourite grandparent gives you something you don’t like – what should you do? Or when someone breaks a window at school and the teacher asks ‘who did it?’ – or when you see the neighbourhood bully picking on someone.*

*These are simple examples, but the issues get to the heart of making difficult decisions about what is right and wrong. The kids find the curriculum highly engaging and will debate these topics vigorously with good humour and reason. It is enjoyable teaching a course which gets such an enthusiastic reception from the kids!”*

Lisa McIntire, MPS Ethics Teacher

*“It was great to see the students thinking about why and what makes things wrong or right, rather than just an acceptance of rules. It was also good to watch them be familiarised with the concept that sometimes these questions of wrong and right are difficult, and it’s ok to be challenged by this.”*


Job Wallis, parent observer soon to be trained as an Ethics Teacher

## **Conclusion**




Mosman Public School is one of the hundreds of NSW schools where children who previously opted out of SRE could be given no meaningful instruction. The provision of Ethics classes means that these children are no longer being discriminated against. Ethics classes at MPS have been an overwhelming success and we urge in the strongest terms that the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 not be repealed.

**Tina Jackson**  
**MPS Ethics Coordinator**  
**On behalf of the MPS Ethics Teaching Team**

**Attachment**




# NEWS

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## Premier's ethical dilemma



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MOSMAN: Supporters of ethics classes in schools have lashed out at a politician's attempt to remove the classes, saying children's rights are at stake.

Several lower north shore schools offer the ethics classes as a voluntary alternative to religious education lessons (SER).

**Should ethics classes be offered at schools as an alternative to SER? Comment below.**

Mosman Public School has one of the highest take-ups of the ethics classes in NSW.

The classes were introduced in February under the former Labor government.

Christian Democratic Party Upper House MP Fred Nile's private members bill to repeal the legislation is set to go to the party room for formal discussion and then to Cabinet. Mr Nile initially threatened to block the government's public sector wages policy unless ethics classes were removed.

Mosman Public School Ethics co-ordinator Tina Jackson said Mr Nile clearly did not reflect community opinion.

"It is the rights of children at stake here - the right to have a meaningful alternative to scripture," she said. "This should not be traded.

"We are asking the premier to stand by his pre-election promise that ethics classes will be preserved in the form legislated for."

Mosman Public School started with two ethics classes in February and a third class was started in second term. Fifty-eight children from years 5 and 6 attend, and the school hopes to introduce it to younger classes soon.

"The support and interest from parents and kids has been extraordinary," Ms Jackson said.

The program, developed by the not-for-profit organisation Primary Ethics, is currently offered to about 2,700 children in the state.

Details: [www.primaryethics.com.au](http://www.primaryethics.com.au).

Tina Jackson and Stephen Bingham are concerned that NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell is considering axing Ethics classes in Public Schools. Picture: DAVE SWIFT