

Submission
No 81

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

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Partially Confidential

EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011
TERMS OF REFERENCE

That General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 inquire into and report
on the
Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011, and in
particular:

- a. the stated objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness and other related matters pertaining to the current operation of 'special education in ethics' being conducted in State schools, and
- b. whether the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed.

**Submission to the Legislative Council General Purpose Standing
Committee No 2**

By Christine Willmot Primary Ethics Coordinator

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into the Primary Ethics Program. I am an on-the-ground participant in the program, being Coordinator for [redacted] school as well as Mentor/Trainer for

the _____ Area. I became involved at the end of 2011 as the program was taken up in the north coast schools.

As a coordinator I have witnessed the enthusiasm and creativity that Grade 5 and 6 children have shown in ethics classes. They understand the ethical points quickly and they 'get' the idea of building on or countering each other's ideas and finding things from their own experiences to support or challenge a point of view. They also appreciate the fact that this kind of exercise in discriminating and 'unpacking' can help them across their other subjects which require looking at a problem from many different angles. Finally, in my experience over the past semester I have seen that the school communities – staff and parents and P&Cs - are very welcoming and supportive of the program. So this first-hand experience of the program has confirmed me in my support its continuation.

Points for Consideration

Firstly, I would like to question the need for an investigation into the ethics program at this point in time since the program has only recently been implemented. The pilot program was thoroughly evaluated by professional academics for the Department of Education as to **objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness and other related matters** and recommendations were put forward for

improvement. (I refer you to the document *NSW Ethics Course Trial Final Report October 2010* on the Department of Education website: www.det.nsw.edu.au)

As a result of the evaluation, the State Education Department approved its roll-out across the state. The new curriculum which replaced the pilot curriculum took into account all of the recommendations of this evaluation, and ongoing and rigorous evaluation continues. The program has only been operating for one year (2011) and in a gradual way, as different schools have progressively taken up the option and as the Primary Ethics organisation has been able to train the personnel necessary to run the program in various parts of the state. My own school and others in my area have only been running the program for one term. Surely it would be better to let the program run for a while before another evaluation is conducted.

This also brings up the obvious question of why Reverend Fred Nile, who has brought on the inquiry, has not offered to have a parallel inquiry into Special Religious Education which has been going for over one hundred years and which has never been investigated and never had parliamentary oversight. Surely this is glaringly undemocratic.

Secondly, I would like to point out that the demand for an inquiry is very unsettling to all the Ethics Volunteers who have put many hours into the development and implementation of the program, ranging from the curriculum writers and the administrators, to the school coordinators, trainers and mentors, and of course the teachers. These are all busy people who often have to travel distances and give up weekends to training sessions, all at their own expense, in order to contribute to what they see as a vitally important and necessary endeavour. They are unanimously dedicated to the need to give their children the opportunity to discuss moral questions in a setting of mutual exchange of ideas. Some of these questions are complex, yet they arise in life every day and many children are aware of this. The uncertainty that the demand for an inquiry has created makes it very hard for people to continue with their efforts over the next six months.

Thirdly, I would like to question the actual rationale and purpose of the inquiry. The terms of the inquiry are open-ended and vague. The “objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness and *other related matters*” of the ethics program are to be investigated but it is not stated what the grounds might be for justifying “repealing” the Act which allowed for the introduction of the program. Are these grounds educational, pedagogical, ethical, equitable, legal or something else?

This should be made clear so that the process is transparent, efficient and not merely subjective, and so that all stakeholders - Committee members, those involved in the Ethics program and members of the public - can contribute in a systematic way and can debate the process on a level playing field. And it should be made clear what "*other related matters*" are.

In the absence then, of evaluative criteria in the terms of reference, I shall address the above aspects – curriculum, objectives, implementation, and effectiveness - according to the criteria that I have suggested, namely: educational, pedagogical, ethical, equitable, legal.

1. Educational/pedagogical.

I am a retired high school teacher with a background in philosophy so I was impressed to find that the content and delivery guidelines of the Ethics Program have strong and clear educational and pedagogical integrity. The topics chosen for discussion are relevant and important for children in the modern age and often relate to other preoccupations of the compulsory school curriculum. The topics are set out with lots of background material to allow the teacher to be fully prepared for the issues and scope of the topic, with suggestions and websites for further research. There are questions and lesson strategies so that individual

teachers can structure the lesson to suit their style and their students, as happens in the core syllabus. The philosophical content is solid but broken down to accommodate the age and maturity of the students. The use of the *community of inquiry* approach is in keeping with current enlightened educational philosophy allowing for the child-centred classroom situation, with the teacher as facilitator rather than controller.

Naturally, with the time constraints of the lessons and the use of volunteer teachers, many of whom have had little or no classroom experience, there are teething problems in the achievement of the objectives of the program, but problems that arise for these reasons *apply equally to the efforts of teachers involved in Special Religious Education*. The Primary Ethics organisation as a whole is constantly refining and evaluating methodology and coming up with support and remedial mechanisms to address problems, while the teachers and coordinators have formed strong collegial relationships in order to workshop and share ideas and strategies. As a coordinator/trainer/mentor for the [redacted] I have organised workshops and get-togethers of teachers in the area and these have been beneficial and inspirational for all concerned. I have been impressed time and again by the enthusiasm and dedication that people have for the program and the level of education that many of the

volunteers have. I have no hesitation in asserting that the program is a groundbreaking educational endeavour that, if allowed to continue will enhance the educational experience of the children who undertake it and bring praise to our education system.

On the other hand, I question whether SRE can claim to have the same educational benefits. Recent surveys of children who have attended SRE classes taken for example by Catherine Byrne from Macquarie University, have reported instances of indoctrination and instruction through fear of punishment and 'hell', and a discouragement of interest in other religions:

<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/04/12/3188943.htm?topic1=&topic2=>

I fail to see how this provides, as Reverend Nile claims, 'a valuable service' to our modern education system which attempts to encourage independent thinking and tolerance in our students. This is probably not the case universally in SRE, but if it were, it would justify questions as to why such instruction wouldn't be better kept in churches or religious settings that openly espouse their own belief systems.

2. Ethics and Equity

Reasons based on ethics and equity have been a very strong component of the arguments put forward for the establishment of a

secular ethics program from its inception. From the first, it was promoted as a worthwhile activity for those children whose parents are not religious and who opted out of the SRE program for their children. It is their democratic right to do so, and principles of equity demand that these children be given access to a secular ethics course. *After all, this is the philosophy which informs the upbringing of such children, as religious education informs the upbringing of those children who are provided with religious instruction in school.*

Supporters of the program also see the benefit that such a regime offers not just to the individual students themselves, but to our democratic society as a whole. So many of the political, social and economic issues that arise in our public lives have a strong ethical content; these need to be teased out so that fair and just decisions are made – *encouraging children to learn from an early age some of the logical and philosophical concepts that can help us find a way through such issues can only be beneficial.* These issues in our multicultural, pluralistic society can often be difficult to solve with a 'one size fits all' solution. This doesn't mean that there is 'no right or wrong answer' as Reverend Nile contends, rather that there *are* right and wrong answers for specific circumstances depending on consequences, balancing out different people's rights, and weighing up benefits against harms. Ethics is a social practice that is built up over time and there *are* definite criteria; in brief, perhaps the

most important criterion is the *harm* done in any situation. Essentially what we are doing when we do ethics is to try to work out how best we can all live together without harming ourselves or each other. Ethical questions have come to apply to many different situations over the years, so now we have to consider not just the obvious things like lying, stealing and killing, but also questions such as: what makes a fair society? How do we live the good life? Do we have a moral responsibility for the homeless, the unemployed, animals, even the environment? *Non-religious parents prefer to have their children consider these issues using the insights of modern moral philosophy and even ideas from psychology and sociology rather than an approach coming from traditional Biblical based religious injunctions.*

3. Legal Issues

I assume that this refers to the concern expressed frequently by religious groups that offering Ethics course to all students contravenes the provision of the Education Act which states that students not doing SRE are not to study other 'meaningful' material. The unfairness of this provision has been powerfully argued by St James Ethics Centre during the struggle to have Ethics approved and I refer the Committee to this argument which is reported in the *NSW Ethics Course Trial Final Report October 2010* mentioned previously. It was also

argued at that time that offering Ethics at the same time as SRE was justified by the principle of offering parents their right to make these choices in full knowledge of the alternatives open to them. These principles are moral principles and are enshrined in law.

I will leave comment on this point here.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For all the above reasons I therefore urge you to support the continuation of the Ethics program and remove the uncertainty that the demand for this inquiry has caused so that those involved can get on with the project of refining and streamlining the program and giving all students in the state the opportunity to participate.

Finally, I would like to suggest a recommendation that, while not actually germane to the present discussion, is something that has come up in the media and in many discussions in relation to the issue. This is the idea that what we need in our school system is a properly conceived *course in comparative religion and ethics, taught by professionally trained teachers as is available in many other countries*. The development of the new national curriculum would be an ideal time to implement this course.

It would enable children to learn about *all* the different religions in a reflective and factual way; it would allow children to see the commonalities underlying various religious beliefs and ethical codes, as well as the differences; it would also give students a richer understanding of the artistic and literary underpinnings of our different cultures. Perhaps SRE and the Secular Ethics Course could join forces and evolve into this solution.

. Thank you.

Christine Willmot

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Now Primary Ethics Coordinator :

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