

Submission  
No 319

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

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Attachment 1 – Overview of The Sex + Ethics Violence  
Prevention Program

The Hon Marie Ficarra MLC  
Chair General Purpose Standing Committee  
NSW Legislative Council  
Parliament House, Macquarie Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

February 24<sup>th</sup> 2012

Dear Ms Ficarra

**Re: Inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to your inquiry on this very important issue. I strongly support the continuation of ethics classes in primary schools throughout NSW and therefore do not consider the legislation enabling the delivery of these classes should be repealed. This position is based on the following experience and expertise.

I have been working on the issue of sexual violence prevention since 1983 and have expertise in sexual assault counselling, national and state policy development around sexual assault prevention, education and research.

In 2007 I developed and implemented the *Sex + Ethics Violence Prevention Program*. A crucial part of the program is the training of educators to deliver the program to young people in their local areas. One hundred educators have been trained across Australia and New Zealand. Since its inception the 6 week program has been delivered to several hundred young women and men aged 16-25 across metropolitan Sydney, regional areas of NSW, with football teams in Queensland and in multiple locations in New Zealand. This is an evidence based best practice program which aims to help young people make ethical decisions around sexual intimacy or other relationships. It particularly seeks to teach skills and knowledge to young women and men in reducing pressured,

coerced sex and sexual assault in dating or casual sexual contexts. Sexual assault remains one of the most underreported of all personal crimes with only about 15 % ever being reported to police or other authorities. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics during 2009 84% of sexual assaults were reported by women and 1 in 4 of the victims were between 10-14 years of age and had a four times higher rate of sexual assault than all other age groups( Australian Bureau of Statistics 03 Jun 2010 Crime Statistics). These statistics highlight the pressing need for violence prevention education programs and in particular to find more effective ways of helping children and young people understand how sexual coercion impacts on victims and the need for offenders to take responsibility for their actions. Many pressured and coerced encounters are not seen by those involved as a crime as they often have outdated views that sexual assault only is perpetrated by a stranger.

The *Sex + Ethics Violence Prevention Program* involves interactive activities conducted over 6 weeks to maximise impact on attitudinal and behavioural change ( See attached program overview for more detail). One of the unique characteristics of the Program is the theoretical underpinning based on an ethical framework adapted by me from the work of Michel Foucault, a French philosopher whose work on how we can become ethical sexual citizens has proved extremely useful to young people. This approach helps young people to consider ethical choices around how they can care for themselves but also how to become more aware of the impact of their desires and behaviours on another person. This is a relational approach to ethics and is very complimentary to the approach being taken in the Ethics Classes in NSW Primary Schools.

The *Sex + Ethics Program* includes a rigorous research evaluation methodology that includes ongoing participant and educator feedback during program delivery, pre and post group survey and follow up of participants 4-6 months after the group is completed. This data indicated the strong impact the Program has had on young people's lives. At six months between 80- 100% reported still using ideas or skills learnt in the program. They used these in making ethical decisions about new or existing relationships and providing advice to their friends and challenging gender stereotypes. Sixty

to 85% also indicated using ethical bystander skills since the groups ended taking up issues of community responsibility raised in the programme and being active participants in standing up against sexual violence. The impact of the ethical framework is evident in these two examples of many:

*Well, for example, the ethical framework provided in the group has been really helpful. I think I'm usually pretty alright at looking after other people's needs/wants and communicating with them about it, but it hadn't occurred to me how important my own safety or needs were in terms of having a good, ethical approach to negotiating and having sex. That sounds ridiculous but I just honestly hadn't considered it. I mean, I'd thought before about what I wanted, but not about taking my safety (emotional and physical) into account in terms of good decision making' (Young woman aged 23 Australia).*

And

*The ideas of better communication, and the ethical framework (realising your effect on others and being more aware of their perspective, even in issues not to do directly with consent) (Male aged 19 New Zealand).*

This data and my experience of training youth workers, sexual assault service counsellors, sexual health staff and others indicates that the ethical framework provides a way for educators to open up conversations about difficult moral and ethical issues and to dialogue with young people about their concerns and to find ethical and creative responses to their own dilemmas and in relationship to friends and intimate partners. Young people do not take kindly to being told by adults what to think and how to behave. An approach based on ethical dialogue and negotiation and reflection moves beyond this resistance to giving them the space to work out issues with an approach to guide their decision making. In the research interviews I conducted prior to developing the *Sex + Ethics Program*, I found many young people were confused about competing messages from family, their friends and ideas from the media on how they should behave. Many young people struggled with how to make good decisions for themselves. The ethical framework developed in the Program seems to be filling this gap for many young people.

Diverse young people, educators, parents and professional groups I address regularly at public forums and conferences are strongly supportive of the approach taken in the *Sex + Ethics Program* and how it supports the National government's Respectful Relationships Education

Program . All are of the view that this works needs to start earlier with primary age children and even with infants. With colleagues from my university and from La Trobe University in Victoria, we are now embarking on just such a research project funded by the Australian Research Council. Over the next 2 years we will continue to interview 5-7 year olds, their parents and educators on how they develop ideas about sexuality but also how they understand respect and ethics and how they impart this knowledge.

All of the above factors, I believe underline the importance of the maintenance of ethics classes in NSW primary schools. We need to provide children with a set of skills to assist them to make ethical decisions throughout their lives not just when they are adults. Providing a choice to attend ethics classes does not detract from children receiving religious instruction if that is what their families wish. Reported figures vary across the sector from 20 -50% on the numbers of children whose parents do not wish them to participate in scripture classes. Even taking a conservative view of the figures, this suggests we are missing a very big opportunity for children to receive some input on ethics rather than just being minded. The idea that religious bodies can dictate that they cannot receive alternative instruction is draconian and does not allow parental choice which is becoming even more important in the modern schooling environment.

Thank you for considering this submission

Yours sincerely

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