

**Submission  
No 109**

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

**Name:** Ms Shirley S Berg AM

**Date received:** 8/02/2012

---



SUBMISSION TO THE MEMBERS OF THE GENERAL PURPOSES  
STANDING COMMITTEE OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES  
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

**SUBJECT:** Inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010

This is my individual response to your invitation to participate in the inquiry process. My interest and knowledge stems from my long and active experience in parent organisations and from the discussions I have had with members, as well as from the many conferences and seminars about all facets of public school education attended over a long period of time.

Amongst many other issues discussed in these forums has always been the problems associated with the students whose parents do not wish them to attend the prescribed SRE (Scripture) lessons. It is fact that the Education Act 1990 protects the provision of religious instruction and that it also allows for students to, if their parents do not wish them to participate, opt out . However it did not make any provision for students, who opt out, to have any meaningful learning experience during the time allocated for Scripture lessons.

It has always seemed to me that parents were seeking a secular complement to scripture to be provided for those who opt out. Never has it been suggested that Scripture lessons be abolished or the time allocated to Special Religious Education be altered.

At the 2005 Annual Conference of the Federation of Parents and Citizens Association of N.S.W. which I attended, there was a very robust debate as delegates expressed grave concern that a great number of students who chose not to attend Scripture lessons were engaged in activities which did not relate to, or support their education. It was obvious that the delegates attending and representing their associations, were expressing an opinion that their students ought to be provided with a proper educational learning experience.

An examination of the last two census results, in the section of religion, will indicate that an ever increasing number of Australian citizens no longer indicate an adherence to a particular religion and this will possibly mean that, in the future, there could be a dramatic increase in the numbers opting out of Special Religious Education classes. It was important therefore that, there be developed an alternative program which complements those lessons undertaken by those representing the various religions, but which provides a proper learning experience for those opting out . This would ensure that all students are spending their time productively.

**THE PILOT PROJECT:**

After consultation with its membership the Federation of P.& C. Associations approached the St. James Ethics Centre to assist in the development of a Pilot Program based on ethical discussions which could be introduced as an alternative to the prescribed scripture lessons.

The Federation made representation to the Minister for Education about trialling ethic lessons in a limited number of primary schools and in November 2009 it was announced that a trial would take place, commencing in second term 2010. This trial was for a 10 week period and was to be offered to those who did not attend the regular Scripture (SRE) lessons, however no student was to be forced to accept these alternative classes.

It is important that members of the committee note that this pilot was, at all times, overseen by the NSW Department of Education and that it was to be evaluated by an independent assessor who was contracted to the Department. As well the ethics course, written by Professor Bruce Cam from the University of New South Wales was examined by the Board of Studies.

At the end of the trial and after receiving a very positive evaluation the necessary Legislation was passed to make the necessary changes to the Education Act. This then enshrined the right for those, opting out of scripture lessons, to choose to attend an alternate course which meant that the time allocated would be used productively.

Just as the teaching of scripture depends on volunteers so did the introduction of ethics classes. This was achieved and at the beginning of 2011 there were 90 ethics classes in 57 schools in operation with all 'volunteer teachers' having completed a two day training session at the University of NSW.

This training course has set a precedence and perhaps a training program, particularly in classroom management, should be a requirement for all who volunteer their services.

Parents believe that there is now a real choice for them if they do not wish for their students to participate in SRE lessons. As an alternative their students can now, if they wish, attend the ethics classes which are now offered. However the Act as amended, still protects the rights of students to opt out of any alternate course offered during the time allocated for SRE classes, so there is no compulsion to participate in Ethics Classes. This is a myth perpetuated by those in the community, and by some media commentators, who do not support the introduction of Ethics Classes or any other alternative learning experience.

### **THE TERMS OF REFERENCE**

Part a. In particular is directed towards the implementation, the effectiveness and the operation of 'special education in ethics classes' as conducted in State schools. I believe this has been well answered in the processes and in the consultations which preceded the introduction of these classes as an alternative to SRE classes in schools.

I assert that ethic discussions, supported by trained volunteers is complementary to scripture, and in no way undermines the teaching of scripture for those who choose to participate.

Ethical discussions allow for the exploration of a range of views and perspectives without being judgemental. Teachers are trained to facilitate the discussion and not to lead it. Discussions between students take place at the level of the student's understanding of 'what is good or bad' or 'what is right or wrong'.

The very positive evaluation of the pilot program indicates that parents seeking an alternative to the SRE classes believe that Ethics classes are giving them choice which has hitherto been denied them.

Of course, as more and more schools are required to respond to the demands of parents that they provide an alternate and productive way to meet the needs of the ever increasing number of students 'opting out' there will need to be an expansion of the ethics classes. This will require the Legislative Council's Committee to recommends ways of meeting the needs of Australia's students so that the time spent at school always provides a valuable learning experience for each of them.

Part b. I would assert that should this Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 be repealed, it would serve to deny parents any choice in respect to having a meaningful learning experience available if they do not wish their students to participate in Special Education Religious classes.

The fact is, that before the amendment to the Education Act, those who opted out of SRE classes were subject to a supervised period of meaningless activity during the time allocated for scripture classes to operate.

Prior to the amendment to the Education Act, Departmental regulations, actually prevented any secular complement to Scripture lessons.

The passing of the amendment to the Education Act, in 2010, allowed for the present ethics program which does not, in any way, conflict with current religious instruction, to go ahead.

**CONCLUSION:**

It is my contention, and in fact, my reason for participating in this important inquiry, is that parents have never sought to abolish SRE classes in Government schools but that there has been a concentrated campaign aimed at denying parents, who for their own reasons wish to exclude their students from SRE classes, the right to seek an alternate secular activity which serves as a meaningful learning experience. The classes which now operate provide that choice.

Shirley S. Berg AM