

**Submission  
No 248**

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

**Name:** Mrs Sharon Cousins

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## **SUBMISSION TO THE NSW PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO ETHICS CLASSES**

**Marie Ficarra (Chair), Paul Green (Deputy Chair) & General Purpose Standing Committee 2 Members**

Dear Chair, Deputy Chair and Committee Members,

The trialling of the ethics for 10 weeks in Term 2, 2010 for Years 5 and 6 was designated for 10 nominated NSW public primary schools, originally intended for Non-Scripture students. However, this was changed by the DET to include both Non-Scripture and Scripture children, to order to ensure "equality of choice" for parents, during the trial period. This was a worrying change because of the real possibility of competition during the Scripture timetable i.e. parents could pull their child/children out of Scripture (Special Religious Education - SRE) and into the Ethics class. As reported, there was one trialled school, where a Scripture Teacher had only one child left in their Special Religious Education (SRE) class, during the 10 weeks Ethics trial. Many parents withdrew their child/children from Scripture and placed them into the trial Ethics program. This was clear evidence of competition during the SRE timetable which had a dramatic, yet widely anticipated result. Also, if the Ethics program is implemented across all primary years, then this option could set a precedent for other groups to seek special access during Scripture.

Ethics topics during the trial period covered areas such as honesty, truthfulness and bullying. These aspects are *already taught* through school values system/HSIE (Key Learning Areas) and with good role modelling by School Principals, Class Teachers, Parents, SRE Teachers and community leaders/volunteers. There is additional *duplication* of ethics topics because some public primary schools have incorporated the "*Positive Behaviour for Success Program*" (PBS). At my local public primary school, the PBS program was "triated" by Class Teachers and was deemed a good program which the P&C provided \$6,000 of funds, during 2009. The PBS program covers areas such as anti-bullying, respect, honesty and treating others well i.e. direct duplication of the Ethics program. It has been suggested that the St. James Ethics Centre should refer their Ethics course to the NSW Board of Studies to possibly implement their ideas within the school curriculum (if different from existing DET material). This is a quote given to our local P&C meeting in March, 2010 from a parent at the school *"...From my understanding of the information provided my child is already participating in enough ethics based programs through (named) PS. Additionally in my home we are constantly teaching our family about moral and ethical practices to function in our society."*

Following detailed discussions and emails with the previous head of the NSW DET/HSIE (before the implementation of the Ethics course in 2011), I was advised that the public schools who requested Ethics during Scripture, had 80% of their student population, within Non-Scripture. As per the DET advices, this represents less than 25% of all public schools across NSW. Therefore the large majority of NSW public primary schools, have a high rate of student population in SRE. As evidenced from the 2010 trial's impact and existing Year 5/6 Ethics classes in 2011, we are now seeing the gradual deterioration of student numbers in SRE, due to the direct introduction of the Ethics program. If the Ethics program is spread across all primary years (K to Year 6), then Scripture attendance will continue to decrease, which will have a knock-on effect in school communities, families and society, as a whole.

There has been sweeping comments made by individuals and organisations that children in Non-Scripture (non-SRE) are left idle. Non-Scripture students at a majority of public schools are adequately supervised through activities such as study, revision, homework, reading and assignment work. I appreciate the need for adequate class management in those minority schools where the majority (up to 80%) of the student population is placed in Non-SRE (Non-Scripture). I can well imagine the number of class teachers and organisation required to manage such a large school attendance during Non-SRE time. But was Ethics program the solution for this obvious need? One of the main criticisms of the Ethics trial as detailed in the evaluation report conducted by Dr. Sue Knight (10.2010), was the issue of class management (discipline) during the Ethics classes. The Teacher's Federation is strongly opposed because of *"the potential impact any future expansion of the program may place on teachers"*. This clearly is a statement of no-confidence in the Ethics program, by public school teachers.

I personally asked the previous DET/HSIE person over the phone, if the DET had undertaken any research (*prior* to the Ethics Trial) on those particular schools that had a majority of their student population in Non-Scripture. Why

was there such a high population in these particular schools, compared to 75% of NSW schools having a majority of children in SRE? Was it because of socio-economic factors or a lack of SRE Teachers or perhaps historical reasons? No such research had been conducted. Therefore having the Ethics trialled in these particular schools was in some respect trying to solve the issue of class management, as it provided an alternative activity. However, the evaluation report stated that class management was still an issue. *"..one must question whether the management issue is best solved by conducting an ethics course in competition with special religious education ...."* per Peter Ingham, Illawarra Mercury newspaper, 19.12.09.

As we know, there are a number of politically motivated secular individuals who actually want SRE (Scripture) completely removed from our public schools. One particular individual attended our local P&C meeting in March 2010 and publicly said *..."This may sound controversial, but I don't think we should have Scripture in public schools"*. This same person had a phone interview with St James Ethics Centre/Primary Ethics Ltd (secular not-for-profit organisation) and was then appointed to become our public school's "Ethics Coordinator" for 2011. As per the NSW Parliament Joint Standing Committees *"Terms of Reference"* point 1, under *"other matters"*, are we able to be assured that such views - contrary to Primary Ethics stated position - were known to Primary Ethics when making such appointments?

Ethics teaching during Scripture time, was against the previous NSW legislation, yet the ex-NSW Labor Govt swiftly maneuvered parliamentary time to allow the Ethics Bill to be quickly approved, prior to the NSW state election in March, 2011. How "ethical" was this by our politicians? There was no inquiry, just a year end 2010 evaluation report with a number of recommendations on how the Ethics program needed improving. The rushed legislation changes were rightly contested by stakeholders and had the Ethics Bill been delayed until after the March, 2011 state election, then it would NOT have passed in the NSW Parliament. This has been a long and costly process.

Children have rights too (both Non-Scripture & Scripture) i.e. information, involvement and decision-making process. A few years ago, I personally witnessed a class of primary aged children in Non-Scripture (Non-SRE). The children were in the school library, quietly reading or doing homework etc. What struck me were the children were very well behaved and adequately supervised but also, I felt a deep sadness - like an injustice which the children experienced by being segregated into "Non-Scripture" - a term I grossly detest. I personally do not believe the Ethics program is the best solution for Non-Scripture or Non-SRE, as it is direct competition during the SRE timetable and impacts negatively on SRE student numbers. As a previous Scripture Teacher and Parent Helper at my local public school, I know the importance of class management, stimulating activities and child learning/development. I honestly would like to see a new alternative provided for parents and children of Non-SRE, as opposed to the moral relativism offered by the Ethics program, which does not provide clear "right and wrongs". As we know, SRE is generally known as "Scripture", so why not have "General Scripture" which incorporates the 3 main religions (values, teaching and history) and includes proper ethical teaching of "right and wrongs" e.g. The Good Samaritan which is about being a good neighbour regardless of race, culture or background.

Other areas for consideration under the "Terms of Reference" point 1 "other matters" are 7 questions stated below:

1. Local churches (or mosques or temples etc) of authorised denominations provide local liaison and accountability points for SRE teachers. Although a local Ethics Coordinator must be found and appointed for a school before Ethics can go ahead, what sort of local supervision and accountability structure is in place for the Ethics Coordinator and teachers (as opposed to accountability only to a head office in distant Sydney)?

2. What standards of child protection training are being provided? Is the 'online' child protection training proposed by Primary Ethics really sufficient? Again, what local body will really know the potential teachers personally to give accountability?

3. Has the Ethics curriculum been revised in light of concerns expressed by Government-appointed academic, Dr Sue Knight's independent evaluation of the Ethics trial, to take account of the tendency towards moral relativism she detected in it?

4. Who will be paying for the teacher's manuals and student workbooks? We understand this maybe from members of the public giving donations to St James Ethics Centre/Primary Ethics Ltd. Can we be assured that the Dept. of Education (NSW), public primary schools or local P&C's, will not be providing any funding towards the Ethics classes (in the same way that it does not provide money to any SRE - Special Religious Education classes)?

5. Will providers of SRE be given equal opportunity to inform parents about the content of their classes, or to otherwise promote SRE?

6. One reason for promoting Ethics was to provide another option for students in non-SRE, who were allegedly sitting around doing nothing, which was a sweeping generalisation and quite disrespectful to the school teachers who supervised them. However this will not solve the problem entirely since some parents will still choose neither SRE nor Ethics. So will the DET and public primary schools ensure that the alternatives provided in non-SRE, such as quiet reading and personal homework are not viewed as a waste of time, but the valuable exercises we would otherwise view them as?

7. Do the GPSC2 Committee Members, NSW MP's, NSW DET officials, Public Primary School Principals/Teachers, NSW P&C Federation Executive/Members, local P&C Committees/Members, School Parents and interested stakeholders, consider it appropriate that an Ethics Coordinator be appointed for our school by Primary Ethics, over-the-phone, without a personal face-to-face interview? Can we be assured by anyone that Primary Ethics has carried out a proper recruitment process and reference checking?

Finally, I support Fred Nile's "*Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011*", but would still like to see the Ethics Class replaced with say "General Scripture" which could incorporate factual and historical teachings from the 3 main religions and offer proper "right and wrong" ethical teaching. I would be happy to offer any help in developing this alternative concept, if permitted. "*General Scripture*" could also be easily adapted into a series of teaching DVD's, to help solve the issue of recruiting and training volunteers, but still supervised by the school teachers.

Some parents may continue to choose to opt their child out into "Non-SRE" or "Non Scripture", but at least this new possible alternative won't be "competition" as such for the other Scripture (SRE) groups and it will also have a better name tag - "**General Scripture**" – so that hopefully many "opted out" children could be included and not excluded.

Yours faithfully,

*Sharon Cousins*

Mrs. Sharon Cousins (21.2.2012)

(School Parent & Helper, P&C Member & Previous Scripture Teacher)