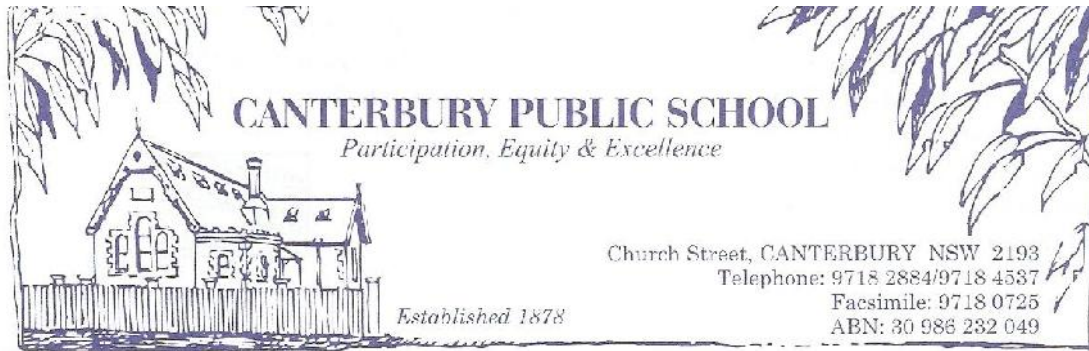


Submission
No 125

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

Organisation: Canterbury Public School P&C Association

Date received: 9/02/2012



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SUBMISSION BY CANTERBURY PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENTS AND CITIZENS ASSOCIATION:

EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011

The Canterbury Public School Parents and Citizens Association (P&C) seeks to make a submission to the NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No.2 Inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011. We note that the Standing Committee will inquire into and report on the following:

- 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- b. whether the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed.*

This submission is authorised by the President of the Canterbury Public School P&C on behalf of the P&C.

BACKGROUND

The Canterbury P&C notes that in 2010 the NSW Department of Education completed a thorough trial of ethics classes in ten government schools. The trial involved leading Australian academics and comprehensive community consultation. In that consultation process, 750 submissions were made, of which 730(97%) were in support of introducing ethics classes to government schools.

On December 1st 2010, the NSW Parliament passed legislation enshrining the rights of children who don't attend Special Religious Education (SRE) classes to have an option to attend classes in philosophical ethics. The legislation states that Special Education in Ethics is allowed as a secular alternative to special religious education at government schools; that if a parent opts out of SRE then the child is entitled to receive special education in ethics if it is reasonably practical for ethics to be made available and the parent has requested it be made available.

SPECIAL ETHICS EDUCATION AT CANTERBURY PUBLIC SCHOOL

Canterbury Public is a small school of approximately 260 students located in the inner west of Sydney. Typical of other schools in the area it is diverse in its socio –economic and cultural mix. SRE classes are conducted every week in a range of Christian denominations as well as other faiths such as the Ba’hai and Islam. At the same time a significant number of families elect not to send their children to SRE classes.

The Canterbury P&C supported the introduction of Special Education in Ethics. In 2011 a parent volunteered to facilitate the class and received training from Primary Ethics. Classes commenced in Term 4 and involved eleven students out of a possible twenty five Stage 3 students from non-SRE families

The Special Education in Ethics classes have been running for only one term at Canterbury Public School. The response from students and parents who have participated has been extremely positive. The ethics classes have helped students understand ethical issues and develop their capacity for moral reasoning. This is particularly significant for these students because they were previously not participating in productive activities during time allocated to SRE.

The introduction of the classes has been problem-free and the P&C and the broader school community is keen to continue this program and progressively make it

available as a choice for families in Stage 2 and ultimately Stage 1. We are mindful of ensuring that the quality of curriculum and delivery is high, and do not wish to move too hastily.

The following comments show that there is widespread support from the school community.

The ethics class facilitator:

What was interesting is how they took on the specific examples that were included (can you steal fruit from a neighbour's tree etc) and developed their arguments about what they thought was right and wrong. The other interesting aspect of this first tranche of classes was that some of the students realised that to participate they really needed to have a think about how they would react in certain situations and they found that hard, which was of course a good thing.

An SRE teacher who is also a parent:

Having witnessed the ethics class's presentation [at combined SRE and ethics classes end of year assembly] it was fantastic to see the kids' enthusiasm and grasp of the complex issues they've been thinking through.

An Assistant Principal:

Participation in ethics classes develops students' critical thinking, as well as giving them insights into the complexity of life's dilemmas.

ISSUES

Canterbury P&C argues that the introduction of ethics in government schools is about parental choice. The introduction of ethics classes at Canterbury is in response to ours and our children's concerns about doing nothing productive and constructive during non-SRE. We do not see ethics classes as a criticism of SRE at our school, but rather a viable alternative to our children doing nothing in non-SRE. As parents we believe we have the right to choose ethics as an alternative to non-SRE. Similarly we see it as equally important to be able to decline ethics classes if they are not seen as appropriate for our children and our family.

The Canterbury P&C notes that the now opposition Australian Labor Party and the current Liberal/National Government both pledged to maintain ethics classes in government schools in their 2011 election commitments to the NSW community. We assert that these commitments reflect the broad bipartisan community support for ethics classes in government schools and that any change in the current legislation should come via political parties campaigning to remove ethics classes at the next NSW election in 2015. To repeal the Act enshrining Special Ethics Education in government schools would specifically discriminate against those students and families that have chosen ethics. Parents and families would be denied the freedom to choose ethics for their children and return them to having no alternative to non - SRE.

We do not believe that this current Parliament has a mandate to repeal legislation that received bipartisan support at the most recent election. It was the initiative of parents that created the opportunity for ethics to be introduced as an alternative to non-SRE; it was motivated by the desire of parents to better utilise the time being spent in non-SRE. We would argue that repealing the Act repeals our right as parents to make informed decisions about our families and our children.

With clear political support evident in the major parties, and with many parents happily making the choice to send their children to ethics classes across hundreds of government schools, we believe that the Act as it currently stands reflects broad community opinion about ethics in government schools and therefore it should not be repealed.

The Curriculum

The Ethics curriculum reflects the complex moral and cultural base of our diverse multicultural society and affords our children the opportunity to consider ethical dilemmas in a structured and thematic approach. At Canterbury Public School the volunteer parent facilitates the curriculum, providing a framework by which the students develop their understanding of ethical dilemmas and how they would deal with those dilemmas. The parent volunteer provides no opinions or personal views on the curriculum topics nor the views proffered by the students. The curriculum has been developed by Primary Ethics working with academics that specialize in teaching ethics to children. The curriculum allows them the opportunity to consider

how to approach ethical issues as well as developing collaborative inquiry and critical thinking. Canterbury P&C supports the philosophical framework in which the ethics classes are conducted.

SUMMARY

The Canterbury P&C supports and encourages the maintenance of SRE, Ethics and non-SRE as being viable and sensible alternatives for parents and families. Each choice affords families the opportunity to have their child engaged in meaningful and fulfilling discussions about their faith and its role in their lives, about ethical behavior and how it influences their lives, or to opt out of both of those arrangements where they are not applicable to the needs of their children and their families. Each choice is representative of needs of the diverse, multicultural and pluralist community that makes up Canterbury Public School.

Consistent with that right to choose, the Canterbury P&C affirms its support for SRE to continue as a valuable and dynamic feature of our school community.

The legislation as it currently stands allows parents and families to make informed and appropriate decisions about what is right for their families in areas that pertain to personal and philosophical beliefs. Repealing the sections of the legislation which provide for ethics classes at our school would be counterproductive and discriminate against families that opt out of SRE.

As our experience of the ethics classes has been positive and productive, we see no reason to repeal the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010. The legislation as it currently stands provides additional options for children who would otherwise be unproductive during time allocated to SRE, without disadvantaging those who wish to participate in SRE.

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