

Submission
No 154

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

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Partially Confidential

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
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I have three children at the local public school. Initially they attended scripture classes. I understand that studying literature and art presumes a familiarity with the Judeo-Christian tradition. I thought it wouldn't hurt, considering the option was watching a video for entertainment. But my kids were taught to pray for the son of the volunteer who was in jail, that their parents are going to hell, and they should talk to their little friends about Jesus. The teaching of scripture in our school is indoctrination.

So, I moved the children to non-scripture. When I explained to my daughter that she is not allowed to learn anything during non-scripture, she cried. She said it is wrong to stop children from learning.

The introduction of the ethics course is about redressing discrimination which, by policy, meant that children who are not attending scripture class are not allowed to learn anything in that timeslot. That is discrimination. It would be discrimination if it were by gender, by nationality, by religion.

If you agree with 'do unto others', then you don't discriminate on the basis of religion, or discriminate against people who hold to no religion. If you wouldn't want your own children discriminated against in public schools, then you can understand why parents are angry.

The ethics course is not just for atheists. It is for anyone who is not being catered for by the classes offered during SRE. It could be people who have a personal form of Christianity but don't belong to a church, people who have an indigenous spiritual practice, practising pagans or anyone else. The ethics class isn't trying to teach atheism.

If the situation was reversed - if children who identified as belonging to a major religion were told that each week for 40 minutes they were not to learn anything while the other children were taught something, that would be a problem. No-one would dispute it. If it were Aboriginal children, or Jewish children or Chinese children, or blue-eyed children, it would be called discrimination.

Everyone is free to value religion. Equally, we need to be respectful of others who have the right to believe whatever they believe.

Public schools should not be battlegrounds for children's souls.

If the committee has the right to interfere with the ethics course, why is it not also looking into all the other courses offered during the SRE timeslot? Is it concerned with the curriculum for Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Baha'i? Would that help make public schools more inclusive and encourage respect for diversity? Does the committee disapprove of teaching children critical thinking in Literacy, HSIE and PDHPE? I could remind the committee that it is in SRE that children are taught about stonings for adultery, virgin birth,

crucifixion, child sacrifice, and hell, but I consider that I don't have the right to criticise any SRE curriculum. I have the right to not enrol my child in those courses and to attend ethics class instead. Is it helpful to call any SRE curriculum a 'fraud' or is the point of SRE, and the ethics class, and the public school system, that we can all live and work and learn together even though we have different beliefs, so long as we respect those differences and acknowledge our commonalities?

When other options in religious instruction were introduced, there was no problem. For example, when Buddhism was introduced (which could be called a philosophy rather than a religion), no-one asked to see the curriculum. No-one held an inquiry..

The ethics class was introduced into NSW Public Schools to address the discriminatory policy which stated that children not attending Special Religious Education (SRE) were to be taught nothing. I hope the committee would oppose such discrimination whether it be by gender, race or creed.

Now the classes are running, and the churches find they had nothing to worry about because they didn't lose students from their SRE classes. Rev Fred Nile said parents don't understand the ethics course and its implications. I think he will find parents do understand. They understand their children were being discriminated against.

Either public education is inclusive or it isn't. By not offering some instruction for children in non-scripture, it isn't. I believe public schools should be inclusive, which is why I've volunteered to teach the ethics course. Of the 102 students in Stage 3 at our school, Ashbury Public, we have 31 students enrolled in the ethics class.

Catherine Walsh