

**Submission
No 179**

INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011

Organisation: Beecroft Primary School Ethics Program

Date received: 21/02/2012

**SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO ETHICS CLASSES FROM THE ETHICS TEACHERS AND
COORDINATOR OF BEECROFT PRIMARY SCHOOL**

This submission outlines the experience of Ethics teachers, Ethics students and parents of Ethics students at Beecroft Primary School where Special Education in Ethics (SEE) classes have been running for the past 12 months.

The stated objectives of SEE

The stated objective of SEE was to end a discriminatory practice in New South Wales state primary schools that prohibited students without religious affiliation or where their religion was not offered as part of the SRE program at their school from engaging in meaningful activity during the SRE period. SEE was designed to offer equal opportunity to non-SRE students while leaving SRE students free to attend classes as they had previously done.

At Beecroft Primary School, which currently has over 130 students opting out of SRE (in a school of some 700 students), these objectives have clearly been met. Children at Beecroft who opt out of SRE have traditionally been denied the opportunity to engage in meaningful activity during the SRE period. Quiet reading for older children and viewing children's movies or television programs for younger children have been the extent of stimulation offered to students at this time. With the introduction of SEE, those students may now choose to take part in class discussions and develop their moral reasoning and critical thinking skills. It is clear that these activities are significantly more meaningful than watching a Disney film for the 15th time.

The introduction of SEE at Beecroft has had no effect on SRE classes at the school. While there was initial opposition to the proposed introduction of Ethics classes from a small group of parents, this quickly dissolved once classes began and it became clear that SEE would have no impact on SRE at Beecroft. This acceptance by people of faith at Beecroft that SEE was not designed to, and did not in practice have any impact on SRE classes or those attending them, mirrors comments made by church

leaders in the wider community. Bryan Cowling from the Anglican Educational Commission has said publicly that there is “no evidence that introducing the ethics classes has done anything to reduce the number of SRE classes”. The Catholic Church has echoed this view, stating that Ethics classes have “little impact on the teaching of Scripture”.

Curriculum

The SEE curriculum has been developed by professionals with experience in teaching ethics to both adults and children. Curriculum training of Beecroft’s volunteer Ethics teachers by the Primary Ethics organisation has been well-organised and thorough. Our volunteer ethics teachers understand the need to adhere to the curriculum and to teach it as they have been directed. The curriculum has been published and has also been made freely available to faith groups so that they too may implement some or all of its content. Formal evaluation and feedback mechanisms have been built into the curriculum to ensure continuous improvement of both content and teaching methods.

Implementation

The implementation of SEE at Beecroft has been equally organised and professional. Our Ethics Coordinator has provided our volunteer teachers with timely and clear briefings on administrative matters while all curriculum-related issues have been efficiently handled by Primary Ethics’ professional teaching staff.

Our teachers and coordinator have worked cooperatively with Beecroft Primary School staff and the allocation of teaching space, confirmation of student numbers and commencement of lessons has been handled with mutual good-will and support.

Our teachers and coordinator maintain regular face-to-face and online contact with other ethics teachers and coordinators from our local area in a group that is overseen by a Primary Ethics Area Coordinator. Our ethics teachers also have log-in access to Primary Ethics’ online teaching resources

and chat sessions, and attend seminars and briefings. Our ethics teachers have available to them, and are encouraged to make use of a variety of expert advisors to answer questions on course content, delivery methods and administrative issues.

Effectiveness

A year on, we can see that Special Education in Ethics has, and will continue to be an extremely successful program for Beecroft students. All Year 5 students who completed the 2011 SEE course have returned to continue classes in 2012. A second class has also been formed this year to take enrolments from new Year 5 students in 2012. Moreover, there have already been enquiries from families joining the school in the K-2 stage as to when ethics classes will be available for their children, showing there is clearly going to be an ongoing demand for these classes.

Anecdotal evidence gathered from comments made by parents of SEE students in 2011 has all been extremely positive with parents reporting that their children were engaged and particularly eager to attend school on "Ethics" days. One parent reported that her son voted Ethics lessons "the best time of the whole week". Another parent remarked how delighted he was that his son happily discussed the Ethics lessons at home, adding that it was the first time his son had "volunteered any information about what he did at school". A number of other parents personally thanked the Ethics teacher during the course of the 2011 year for giving their children an opportunity to engage in structured discussion at school.

The positive reception for Ethics at Beecroft is consistent with current research in education which finds that children who are given opportunities to explore purpose, meaning and virtues are better able to contribute to their own well-being and have better mental health outcomes than children not offered these opportunities. It is also fully in line with the wider trend towards inclusion of

programs in ethical conduct and integrity in corporate and government institutions around the world.

There are only two concerns interested parents at Beecroft have about Ethics classes: one is that SEE is not yet available for Year 3 and 4 students (the curriculum for this course is currently being developed); and the second is an ongoing fear that the demands of a vocal minority with political leverage could lead to a future prohibition on Ethics classes. While we welcome reasonable scrutiny of SEE, we believe the current Inquiry, which focuses solely on SEE while religious lessons are allowed to continue without any requirement to submit to government investigation, is discriminatory in nature. Democracy ensures that minority groups have a right to state their views; it does not and should not also give such groups the power to impose those views on, or restrict the freedoms of, other individuals.

Teaching staff at Beecroft may also be concerned about the current threat to SEE. Beecroft Primary School has a large and growing number of children who opt out of SRE – for a range of reasons – and are supervised in non-scripture. The long-term increase in the number of non-scripture students at the school has occurred quite independently of the introduction of SEE at Beecroft. The supervision of so many children places an added burden on teaching staff at the school. By making SEE available to this group, the Ethics program has reduced the number of children requiring teacher supervision during SRE. The planned expansion of SEE to cater for non-scripture students in Years 3 and 4 will further reduce the school's supervisory burden. Obviously a prohibition on SEE would add once again to the supervisory burden for teaching staff during the SRE period.

Concluding remarks

Parents and students all over New South Wales supported the proposed introduction of Ethics classes in state primary schools. That support continues, and with the active contribution of Ethics

teachers and coordinators, has resulted in a successful program being delivered to many engaged and enthusiastic students. The experience of Beecroft Primary School demonstrates clearly that SEE is embraced by Ethics students and their parents and has had absolutely no destabilising effect on SRE classes. The Ethics program also actively assists the school by reducing the supervisory burden placed on it by the large numbers of students who opt out of SRE.

The program also, most importantly, upholds the principles of equal opportunity for all and freedom of thought and speech. This is a key achievement given that past policies have, for many years, directed our state primary schools to actively discriminate against students without religious affiliation or from a religion not offered as part of the SRE program at their school. The fact that this inquiry has been allowed to proceed suggests that the rights of those students are, once again, under threat. If the inquiry results in further obstacles to the continuation of Ethics classes in New South Wales, the wider public may well regard it as a cynical exercise in political expedience.

Philippa Stewart (Ethics Teacher, Beecroft Primary School)

Andrea Spencer-Cooke (Ethics Teacher, Beecroft Primary School)

Penny Dean (Ethics Coordinator, Beecroft Primary School)

Maree Perfrement (Parent, Beecroft Primary School)