

**Submission  
No 251**

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

**Name:** Ms Lisa Darke

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The introduction of an alternative for the students at NSW public primary schools to attend Ethics education during SRE time in 2011 has been a progressive and well deserved improvement for students who opt out of scripture classes (also referred to as SRE). Whilst the number of students who do not attend scripture is not officially recorded, anecdotal reports suggest as many as 25% (or around 100,000) children enrolled in NSW primary schools "opt out" for that period every week". (Primary Ethics website). These children have never been allowed to use the SRE time constructively, and are only permitted to do something quiet, colour in, read, complete homework, or just sit outside an office. In a time-poor curriculum, the opportunity for these students to actually use the time constructively and discuss ethical issues and discover possible responses or behaviours to these issues, has been for most parents and students (religious or not) a very useful and welcome alternative.

That Rev Nile is opposed to the children of NSW engaging in ethical discussion and developing their own thinking and responses to such issues is a very worrying concern indeed. As A Volunteers Manager for Primary Ethics I come into contact with many parents, teachers, Principals and students. It is my experience that these people (irrespective of their religious convictions), firmly believe Mr Nile's thoughts on this issue are not only outdated for this century, but without logical reasoning. People tell me continually that they believe the work Primary Ethics does in delivering such a professional opportunity for these children who opt of out SRE classes, to do something which engages them and encourages them to think about ethical issues is something to be firmly supported. Any learning opportunity where young students are given the opportunity to think about and discuss tricky situations in which they may find themselves in the future is to be encouraged. Young people often find themselves in difficult situations and without time to analyse their options or choices with clarity and have to make choices in haste. Ethics classes offer young people the chance to think about and discuss with their peers possible responses to a variety of such situations and hence may give them the chance to make more informed (and hopefully more responsible) choices in these situations.

Mr Nile has asked for an inquiry into the:

- 1) Stated objectives;
- 2) Curriculum;
- 3) Implementation;
- 4 )Effectiveness

And other related matters pertaining to the current operation of Ethics classes in NSW government schools.

- 1) Stated objectives.

The objective of Ethics classes is to offer enquiry based classes where students have the opportunity to think about and discuss ethically difficult situations and scenarios. Hence students are exposed, with their peers, to alternative ways of thinking about, and hence responding to such situations.

## 2) The Curriculum

It is important to note that the curriculum has been amended and improved since the pilot program which was conducted in 2009. Mr Nile has in the past, when commenting on the curriculum, made comments on the pilot programme curriculum which is not the one now in use.

The Primary Ethics curriculum is an extremely impressive one. Top academics (from the field of philosophical ethics and child education) from around Australia have put together the curriculum and had it approved by the Department of Education for age appropriateness. Faith groups who present SRE have not undergone any such scrutiny.

I have had many parents tell me that one of the reasons they want to become involved in Primary Ethics (either as a volunteer, or by sending their children to Ethics classes) is because they have personally had bad experiences with their children being subjected to fear tactics by SRE teachers telling their children that they should believe what they say, or they will go to a very bad place indeed.

Primary Ethics are willing for anyone to look at the Ethics curriculum and have stated that they will provide the curriculum free of charge for faith groups to use as is, or to amend in accordance with the frameworks of their particular religions.

As I mentioned before, the curriculum is, from the perspective of a parent of a child attending ethics class, very professional, and one which addresses issues which I believe are extremely relevant. I believe it provides the foundation for the students attending the classes to become more socially responsible and thoughtful young people.

“Children in the younger primary years examine topics such as being left out, sharing and bullying, while older children reflect on issues such as homelessness and child labour to help them consider the feelings and interests of others – one important aspect of moral reasoning. Other aspects include understanding consequences, having empathy, appreciating difference, having common capacities and giving equal consideration. These are tackled through a range of topics as diverse as How Important is it to Look Good? Are Rules Always Fair? Pride, Teasing and Animal Rights.”

Evidence shows that well-reasoned moral judgement does not come automatically as young people mature and that these skills are best developed by engaging children in collaborative dialogue about a wide range of issues that matter to them. That’s what our Primary Ethics’ curriculum does. Once acquired, these skills accompany individuals into adulthood.”(Primary Ethics website).

## 3) Implementation

It is extremely hard to see where the implementation of Ethics classes can be criticised. The team of volunteers who have been responsible for implementation of Ethics classes are absolutely outstanding in the professional manner in which they have put together this programme. I am continually astounded by the level of direction, planning, development and delivery provided by Primary Ethics. The Board of Directors comprises many esteemed and respected individuals from our community (Simon Longstaff, Bruce Hogan, Diane Giblin, Robin Low, Michael Pain, Teresa Russell and Leith Brook) and as a volunteer within the organisation I am continually impressed by their leadership.

Every aspect from recruiting suitable volunteers (which is a role I perform) to training, and ongoing professional development of the teachers, is conducted in an impressive manner using state of the art technical expertise to ensure consistency and transparency.

Implementation is further enhanced by the hundreds of volunteers donating their time, energy and commitment to this worthy endeavour. Each volunteer submits a CV, a paragraph on why they want to assist Primary Ethics and an Expression of Interest. All of these documents are contained on Primary Ethics VMS, a web based Volunteers Management System (developed, installed and then trained by professional IT specialists – voluntarily). The various roles performed by volunteers from the community to ensure implementation of Ethics education is of highest degree are as follows.

- 1) Volunteer Managers (a role I have performed since January 2011) are responsible for the recruitment of Ethics Coordinators and ensuring the communications from Primary Ethics to Ethics Coordinators and Teachers continues. All documents are templates which are sent electronically to Volunteers, so consistency is maintained.
- 2) Ethics Coordinators are people who act as a liaison between the school, the ethics teacher and Primary Ethics (via the Volunteer Manager). A coordinator's first role is to recruit a teacher (following standard template questions which need to be recorded also on template forms then placed on the VMS). Ethics Coordinators complete a police check at their own expense.
- 3) Ethics Teachers. After a volunteer teacher has been interviewed by the Ethics Coordinator and deemed suitable for the role, they then need to complete a police check, a working with children module, then attend a 2 day training course.

I believe, such well structured roles ensure implementation remains and continue to be, of utmost importance to Primary Ethics.

Ongoing support for these roles is another system well in place- chat rooms and forums are available. Additional training was last year also organised when a number of teachers commented on the disruptive behaviour of some students. This prompted PE to organise a "Behaviour Management session" for teachers conducted by an Ethics teacher (who also is a professional lecturer). This session was recorded and is now available to view on the PE website.

Primary Ethics continues to keep all volunteers up to date as communication is not only face to face, via the telephone, but also online. Effective systems are in place and communication is current due to the effective use of technology.

#### 4) Effectiveness.

As to the effectiveness of ethics classes, as we have only been in operation for a year, hard empirical data does not exist. However, I have personally only heard favourable and positive comments about the course from students, parents and Ethics teachers alike. I believe the Ethics classes are effective as often the students continue the discussion after class and include their peers (some of whom may not have been in the Ethics class). I have spoken to many parents over the year (with children attending SRE classes as well as those whose don't) all of whom fully support the continuation of ethics classes as an alternative

choice to SRE. I have also spoken with parents of children attending religious schools and they too support ethics as a choice at NSW public schools.

There is no reason why children and parents in the NSW public school system should suffer as a result of Mr Niles refusal to accept that people hold different views to his.