

Submission
No 291

INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011

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Date received: 24/02/2012

Appendix A – Letters and emails of support regarding the retention of ethics classes in NSW

Submission from Greens member for Balmain Jamie Parker to the NSW Upper House inquiry into the *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011*

24 February 2012

The Greens strongly oppose any moves to repeal the ethics alternative to special religious education because:

- They brought to an end 130 years of discrimination against children whose parents do not adhere to one of the main organised religions offered by the school;
- All children deserve to access to meaningful lessons at school instead of being forced to waste up to one hour a week filling in time; and
- By any measure the introduction of the ethics classes has been a major success, and has the overwhelming support of the community.

Since its inception, special religious education (SRE) in NSW public schools has unfairly and irrationally discriminated against the growing number of children from families that reject the organised religions on offer.

For one hundred and thirty years, students in public schools whose families did not belong to an organised religion were forced to waste up to one hour a week drawing, running around the playground or watching videos.

In an increasingly crowded curriculum and increasingly crowded learning spaces, these children were denied access to any instruction.

It is the right to instruction at school that the legislation enshrining the ethics alternative seeks to address. For that reason, I am urging the inquiry to recommend they be maintained.

Role of special religious education in public schools

The so-called settlement of 1890 to allow SRE to be delivered in public schools not only discriminates against children from atheist families. It also excludes those who follow a creed that is not offered in the school as well as the many parents who felt that religious instruction is a private matter.

The Department of Education's policy dictated that schools were to provide appropriate care and supervision at school for students not attending SRE. This may involve students in other activities such as completing homework, reading and private study.

Crucially, these activities were not permitted to "compete" with SRE nor be alternative lessons in the subjects within the curriculum or other areas, such as ethics, values, civics or general religious education.¹

¹ https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/detresources/Ethics_Evaluation_Final_Report_11112010_HQssrhmwk.pdf
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It was a policy that was discriminatory and wasteful and founded only in the conviction held by some individuals and organisations that their beliefs should hold a privileged position.

This is unacceptable in a multicultural and multi-faith free society. It is also deeply offensive to those who do not share confidence in the infallibility of these religious beliefs.

I have heard clearly and loudly from my constituents that they want an end to this outdated and discriminatory practise that has seen thousands of students wasting up to one hour a week of precious educational time.

The campaign for an ethics alternative

After a concerted campaign by the P&C Federation, the St James Ethics Centre and the Greens, the former Labor government introduced a trial of an ethics course in 10 NSW public schools during Term 2, 2010. Two of those schools are in the electorate of Balmain: Rozelle PS and Leichhardt PS.

The St James Ethics Centre and Professor Philip Cam from UNSW developed the course that invited young people to think about challenging dilemmas they might face, without reference to religion or faith. The trial involved more than 500 students in Year 5 and 6.

Responsibility for the trial's organization and financial support lay with the St James Ethics Centre which, through the efforts of an appointed Pilot Project Coordinator, took on the tasks of sourcing a curriculum, recruiting schools and volunteer teachers, arranging a training session for volunteers, and maintaining a web space to provide ongoing volunteer support.

Volunteers were recruited from each school community, with the recruitment process managed by school principals in close consultation, on the whole, with Parents and Citizen's committee representatives who served as points of contact between the schools, the St James Ethics Centre and the volunteers.

Many religions, including the Uniting Church, the Hindu Council, the Islamic Council and the Bahai faith welcomed the trial.

Others, including the Sydney and Wollongong Diocese of the Catholic Church and the Sydney Anglicans reacted irrationally, running a misleading and dishonest campaign based on the claim that the ethics course would undermine religious education and offer an unfair advantage to atheists.

The independent evaluation of the trial showed that it was successful and with some minor amendments recommended a further roll out of the classes.

The findings of the evaluation demonstrate the effectiveness of the course in relation to improving students' understanding and skills in ethical decision making, and the overall appropriateness of the course content, activities and resources and of the associated training.²

² https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/detresources/Ethics_Evaluation_Final_Report_11112010_HQssrhmwPK.pdf

The Keneally government then considered the permanent implementation of the ethics alternative to SRE.

Concerned about the likely election of an O'Farrell government, the Greens encouraged the then Education Minister Verity Firth to lock in the legislated right to offer ethics courses in the one hour set aside for special religious education.

A Coalition government was much more likely to buckle to pressure from the hostile conservative religions and cancel the ethics option. It was felt that overturning legislation would create a greater barrier to the cancellation of the classes.

The Greens worked with the Keneally government to secure the passage of the *Education Amendment (Ethics) Bill 2010* to enshrine in law the ethics option for children who do not attend scripture.

Ethics classes

After the legislation was passed, the NSW government tasked St James Ethics Centre to develop and deliver ethics education classes in urban, regional and rural primary schools. This led to the establishment of Primary Ethics Limited, an independent not-for-profit organisation, to develop an engaging, age-appropriate, interconnected curriculum that spans the primary years from Kindergarten to Year 6 and to then deliver ethics education free of charge via a network of specially trained and accredited volunteers.

By the end of its first year Primary Ethics will have over 400 trained and accredited volunteers in place, teaching Ethics to over 3500 students. Schools in the Balmain electorate have enthusiastically taken up the ethics alternative, and many of my constituents are either parents of children taking the classes, or volunteers themselves.

The Greens strongly support and commend the St James Ethics Centre's work in providing a valuable educational experience for children who do not wish to take part in the organised religions on offer in their public school.

Ethics or the science of moral reasoning is a well developed area of study and has been taught successfully in schools around the world. The developmental consequences for students are well documented and positive.

I have heard many positive stories from members of my community about the issues raised in the lessons. Please see attached a selection of the many emails and letters I have received strongly opposing moves by the Rev. Fred Nile to remove ethics classes (appendix A).

The curriculum is readily available on the Primary Ethics website.

It is clearly understood that the course does not substitute for the values and ethical reasoning that is already taught across the curriculum in public education.

It is not correct to assert, as some critics of the trial did, that it will lead or has led to the abolition of scripture classes or that it will restrict the rights of families to choose to send their children to official religion classes.

Organised religions will still have access to up to one hour per week for those families who opt to send their children to their classes.

It is also incorrect to claim that the trial creates a conflict of choice between ethics and religious instruction. The ethics classes are taught to students whose parents do not wish them to attend religious instruction.

I would also like to take this opportunity to place on record my complete and utter rejection of the notion put forward by Fred Nile that the content of the ethics classes is comparable to Nazi ideology.³ This is an appalling and untrue representation of the course by a person who has an unhealthy obsession with the destruction of the ethics alternative.

Opposition to the ethics alternative collapses

By July last year it became apparent that NSW's two largest churches had dropped their campaign against the ethics alternative to special religious education in public schools, leaving Christian Democrat MP Fred Nile with only fringe support.⁴

The Catholic and Anglican churches finally recognised that denying the rights of children who do not attend their scripture classes was not having an impact on the teaching of SRE and was quickly turning into a public relations disaster.

Those few remaining individuals who are against the retention of the ethics classes, including Fred Nile, are free to tell their followers what they might or might not believe, and what their children might or might not be exposed to. It is ultimately up to the followers whether they continue to follow and believe.

It is, however, completely unacceptable for Mr Nile or any of the organised religions to seek to restrict the rights of those who do not subscribe to their creeds.

Ethics classes in public schools are of no concern to them and they should not be allowed to undermine the options available to children who do not follow their creed.

O'Farrell government bows to minority voice

The Greens have strongly condemned the O'Farrell government for its role in casting a dark cloud over the future of ethics classes. Thousands of students attending ethics classes are being held hostage due to the Premier's determination to keep the conservative crossbench onside in return for their support for his government's legislative agenda.

In August last year on private members business day in the NSW Upper House the government granted Mr Nile contingency to jump ahead of the other items in the order of precedence, and introduce his legislation to repeal the ethics classes.

Even more concerning was the way the government permitted Mr Nile to adjourn debate on the bill until 16 September. The Greens wanted to have this matter debated and settled as soon as possible so that the future for the ethics classes was guaranteed.

³ <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/nazi-ideology-in-ethics-classes-says-nile-20110805-1iff.html>

⁴ <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/nile-isolated-as-anglicans-back-ethics-classes-20110720-1hp05.html>

The delay gave Mr Nile more time to negotiate the referral of his bill to an inquiry, despite the complete and utter collapse of opposition to the ethics classes.

The government should never have allowed this matter to get to this stage. They should have forced a debate and settled the issue.

The O'Farrell government has been at pains to explain its position on ethics classes, but the Premier can't have it both ways. He either supports the ethics alternative or he doesn't. If he genuinely supports their retention why has Mr Nile been given such generous treatment?

It is the Greens belief that the O'Farrell government is sacrificing the educational outcomes of thousands of students in this state and failing to honour its own election commitment to retain the ethics alternative in order to appease Fred Nile's appetite and a tiny religious minority.

If the government really wanted to maintain the classes and not break its promise to the electorate it would have simply allowed Fred Nile's bill to be debated and voted down.

Instead we have a costly, time-consuming Upper House inquiry that has thrown the classes into doubt and is causing parents and schools unnecessary confusion and stress.

Narrow terms of reference

Given the level of scrutiny that the ethics course has already undergone and the complete absence of any formal complaint about their operation, I believe that this inquiry is an unnecessary sop by the O'Farrell government to Fred Nile.

To provide genuine relevance and information for parents and the wider community, the inquiry's terms of reference should also have included an investigation into what is going on currently in SRE classes in NSW public schools.

It is totally discriminatory to focus yet again on the course content of ethics course without also applying the same level of scrutiny to the SRE classes that have not been reviewed for more than 3 decades.

There can only be one explanation for the failure of the committee to broaden the terms of reference of the inquiry to include the delivery of SRE in NSW public schools and that is the O'Farrell government's determination to keep Fred Nile happy.

Concluding remarks

This submission argues strongly for the retention of the ethics classes in NSW public schools as an alternative to SRE. For too long children the growing number of children from families that reject the organised religions on offer in their school have been discriminated against and forced to waste valuable educational time.

My constituents in the electorate of Balmain have overwhelmingly thrown their support behind the introduction of the secular ethics alternative to SRE and as their local member I urge the committee to recommend their retention.

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