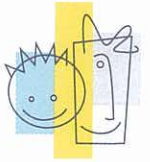


Submission
No 177

INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011

Organisation: Commission for Children & Young People

Date received: 21/02/2012



Ms Marie Ficarra MLC
Chair
General Purpose Standing Committee No.2
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000



Dear Ms Ficarra

I write in response to your correspondence inviting the Commission for Children and Young People, (the Commission), to make a submission to the Inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011. The Commission has a mandate to promote the wellbeing, welfare and safety of children, and the participation of children in matters that concern them.

The terms of reference of this Inquiry are to consider 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. The Committee also wants to know whether the *Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010* should be repealed.

The Commission continues to support the provision of Special Education in Ethics (SEE) in NSW public schools. The Commission believes the provision of SEE provides parental choice in finding meaningful alternatives for students who currently do not undertake Special Religious Education (SRE). The proposed Bill seeks to take away something that is already supported by many families whose children do not undertake SRE.

According to Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning, children move through three stages of moral development: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. As they move through these stages children's motives for decision-making and reasoning change. During the pre-conventional stage children are primarily motivated by their own needs or to avoid punishment. As individuals move into the conventional stage their relationships with peers become more influential and they generally make decisions to protect their identity within the group. The final stage, post-conventional sees an individual thinking more globally about justice and universal moral values.

I believe ethic classes can play an important role in creating a safe environment for children and young people to navigate through the stages of moral reasoning. Most of the topics in the curriculum provide students with the opportunity to develop increasingly sophisticated knowledge and skills in moral reasoning. 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.

In the future and as resources allow, it may be beneficial for ethics teachers to be provided with information about the development of children to assist their understanding of a child's perspective, the motives for their decision making and how a child relates to the world. In 2011 the Commission held a seminar on the social and emotional development of children aged 9-14 years, which might be a useful source of information and can be viewed on line at: <http://kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/ourwork.cfm>.

I am aware the Department of Education and Communities are currently finalising a policy on SEE and I welcome this as a critical step in supporting the implementation of ethics classes. In the interim, the Department has provided sensible guidelines for school principals concerning the introduction of ethics classes.

It appears that Primary Ethics are committed to the evaluation and review of their curriculum and approach and have implemented the recommendations from the 2010 pilot. An outstanding recommendation relates to action required from the Department of Education and Communities to distribute fact sheets about SEE curricula to parents and carers. The Commission supports this as an ongoing area for action, so parents and carers can make informed decisions about their child's learning and developmental needs.

I am also aware that Primary Ethics has conducted a survey of parents and children the outcomes of which will no doubt assist in the future development of ethics classes in NSW.

I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry and trust that the comments provided are of assistance. For further communications on this matter, the contact person is Mr Gregor Macfie, Director Policy and Research on (02) 9286 7243 or at Gregor.Macfie@kids.nsw.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

Megan Mitchell
Commissioner
February 2012