

**Submission  
No 107**

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

**Name:** Ms Lisa McKay

**Date received:** 7/02/2012

---

Individual Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry  
into Ethics Classes

February 2012

**This submission is made in support of Ethics classes as an alternative to Special Religious Education in NSW Primary Schools and for the retention of the *Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010* in its current form.**

Background

I make this submission as:

- one of the original 30 volunteer ethics teachers selected to teach the Pilot Ethics Course in NSW in May 2010;

- a volunteer Ethics Teacher who has taught the course since it began in February 2011;
- the parent of a student who undertook the first Ethics course in 2011;
- a government lawyer who has practised in the NSW Public sector for over 11 years; and
- a qualified NSW Primary School Teacher.

I am willing and able to be called to give evidence at the Public Hearings of the Committee if required.

## Submissions in response to the Committee's

### Terms of Reference:

#### *a. Stated objectives of Special Education in Ethics*

The stated objectives of Special Education in Ethics (SEE) is to provide a secular alternative in government schools for students whose parents object to them receiving Special Religious Education (SRE). Relevantly, a parent must also **request** that their child receive SEE. It will not be taught to any student unless his or her parent specifically objects to SRE and requests they receive SEE.

Clearly therefore, it is not, nor ever has been, the stated objective of SEE to relace SRE or indeed “Non-Scripture” for those parents who request their child attend either. It has only ever been intended as a meaningful alternative to students doing nothing when others are attending SRE.

I submit that SEE has met and exceeded its stated objectives. It genuinely provides a high quality, meaningful alternative to those students.

Many parents have expressed their appreciation to me for the availability of Ethics at their child's school. This is particularly the case for parents who have different views as to whether their children ought to attend SRE (and if so, which faith group) or "Non-Scripture". It must be remembered that in Australia today, children frequently have parents from different faiths or no faiths. These parents often struggle with the decision as to what, if any, religious education their child should receive at school.

This is also the case for parents whose particular faith group is not available during SRE at their child's school.

## *Curriculum.*

As a volunteer teacher of both the Pilot Ethics Course and the Philosophical Ethics course taught in 2011, I can attest to the quality and relevance of both curricula. Both courses were thoughtfully developed by Australian Academics, with extensive research and practical experience in teaching Philosophical Ethics to children. The curriculum is current, relevant, age appropriate and engaging. It has been reviewed by the Department of Education; feedback from teachers and students has been sought and incorporated into the course. It is well structured and the lessons carefully sequenced. The teacher resources are useful and readily available.

I have taught Ethics in my children's school and in two other local schools in my area. In my experience, the students respond very well to the content of the course and engage with the subject matter in a thoughtful and

considered manner. I can see this in the quality of the student responses and the way in which these develop and deepen throughout the year. The curriculum covers a variety of ethical issues, introducing everyday dilemmas and inviting students to think about what ought to be done. Students are invited to offer their views, listen to and consider the views of their classmates, and justify their viewpoints with sound reasons.

The dilemmas are often modern versions of ethical questions considered throughout history by philosophers. This is an excellent introduction to logical reasoning and develops deeper thinking, more mature expression of views and considered decision-making. I believe this has a positive 'flow on' effect for other key learning areas in the primary curriculum including literacy and numeracy. In addition, it is a sound basis for developing skills for secondary and tertiary education.

## *Implementation*

The implementation of ethics classes has been smooth and professional. *PrimaryEthics* is an extremely well organised body giving support and resources to their volunteers. Co-ordinators at the school level and Regional Managers work together to ensure that all students who want to attend ethics classes are able to do so. They recruit volunteers, provide training opportunities, mentoring and special workshops (eg behaviour management). As a teacher, it is a pleasure to volunteer in this organization because of the dedication and professionalism of all those involved. You feel well supported and valued and this translates into the classroom with happy, confident teachers.

The classes are well organised; with numbers that allow each student to participate fully in each session. The

discussion rules and format assist the flow of a group discussion.

Ethics sessions co-exist comfortably with the SRE sessions and I believe have enriched the quality of education for all children in NSW primary schools.

### *Effectiveness*

Ethics classes enjoy a high level of support from parents in my school community. Approximately 60% of year 5 and 6 students elect to do Ethics. Students range in age from 10-12 years. This is a very formative time, as students move toward adolescence and prepare to leave primary school for the challenges of secondary school.

Thinking and talking about everyday ethical dilemmas is very effective in transitioning students to a more mature engagement with education. They are becoming more

independent and developing their own viewpoints based on what they see, hear and experience of the world. I believe that ethics is extremely effective in assisting students in this age group to begin to take responsibility for their own beliefs and behaviour in a considered way.

*b. Whether the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed.*

Repealing the *Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010* would remove the legal requirement to offer Ethics classes and return to the situation where children who opt out of SRE are prevented from doing anything meaningful. This would be highly discriminatory, creating an unacceptable divide between students whose parents want them to do SRE and those who do not.

As a parent of a student who attends Ethics classes and very much enjoys the sessions, I could not imagine trying

to explain why he no longer had this option available.

The idea that he would be required to do nothing while others did SRE would be utterly absurd and an entirely unacceptable reversion.

Lisa McKay

7 February 2012.