

Submission
No 452

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

Special Education in Ethics was intended to provide a meaningful alternative for children whose parents had already opted them out of SRE and to correct perceived discrimination against those children. SRE was to remain the default option for parents. Instead we now have a system that discriminates against those who send their children to SRE and provides a conflict of choice for parents between different types of learning. Issues of inadequate supervision of non SRE kids have not been addressed. The implementation of the course offered by Primary Ethics fails as an appropriate complement to SRE in this timeslot.

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011
BY

Special Education in Ethics was introduced into schools in 2011 with the objective of providing a meaningful alternative to non scripture for children whose parents had already opted them out of SRE. The claim was made that the introduction of ethics would correct discrimination inherent in a system that did not allow for alternative instruction during SRE time. The implementation of the course was intended to provide a complement to scripture and for SRE to continue to be the default option.

The implementation of the course offered by Primary Ethics fails to meet a number of these objectives.

1. Previous government policy did not allow for instruction in ethics during SRE time so as not to create a conflict of choice for parents in a timeslot set aside for SRE. The reason why this conflict of choice is now appropriate has not been satisfactorily addressed. The undertaking by Primary Ethics to provide all curriculum to SRE providers to allow them to incorporate it into their SRE courses fails to recognise the integrity of the SRE curriculum and the different nature of the learning that is taking place.
2. The SEE course can best be described as a general course in critical thinking. The claim is often made that children enjoy the course because there are no wrong answers. The claim is that no particular worldview is being presented. SRE by nature allows children to receive instruction in a particular religious worldview. They are very different types of learning and to place a general course in critical thinking in a timeslot set aside for specific instruction in a particular worldview creates the conflict of choice referred to above.
3. The objective of reducing discrimination has not been met by the implementation of SEE. The previous system respected the religious choices of all parents. Those who wished to send their children to SRE were able to do so in a timeslot set aside for that purpose. Those who saw so little value in SRE that they preferred to withdraw their children were able to do so. The claim that children were denied learning in ethics by the system is incorrect. The learning that they were denied was SRE and that was at the wish of their parents.
4. The system we have now does however discriminate on religious grounds. Those who wish their children to receive religious instruction are denied access to a general course in critical thinking. My own children who attend SRE have enjoyed attending a voluntary philosophy course run at lunchtime at our school. It is a completely different type of learning. Were this course to be run as part of the ethics course then my children would be denied access to it because of their attendance at SRE. This type of discrimination has no place in our public school system.
5. There will always be some parents who would send their children to SRE regardless of the other options available at that time. There will be parents who had already opted out of SRE and so welcome the introduction of SEE as an alternative. There is however a large group of parents who may not be particularly religious but value the opportunity for their children to attend SRE. The intent of the SRE timeslot is not only to cater for children of families of strong religious convictions. Many families recognise the benefit of

SRE in exposing their children to the faith of their heritage or one of the major faiths that have shaped our world and thought. This objective is compromised by placing a general ethics course on at the same time which would have broad appeal. These parents do not object to their children receiving religious instruction (a requirement under the amendment to the Act), but rather will find themselves in a position of having to choose between SRE and ethics. At the moment the course is only available to years 5 and 6 and so parents have to consciously move their children from SRE to ethics at the beginning of year 5. When the course becomes available in Kindergarten then many parents will find themselves having to make a choice between ethics and SRE.

6. The intention of government legislation is that SRE is to be the default option for parents. A general course in critical thinking designed to have as broad an appeal as possible will lend itself to function as a default option when the alternatives are more specific in their scope. This will occur regardless of the procedural arrangements designed to do otherwise. At our school, parents are able to opt out of SRE and enrol in ethics with the one form. Thus on the ground the implementation and administrative procedures surrounding the course bear little resemblance to the requirements of the Act that governs them. This is directly due to SEE not being able to function as it was intended ie merely as an option for those parents who had already opted out of SRE because they objected to their children receiving religious instruction.

7. Our school system should engage as many students as possible as often as possible and so it is appropriate to consider how to provide for children whose parents do not want them to receive religious instruction. The introduction of SEE has not guaranteed that poor supervision practices of non SRE students will be addressed. It may be appropriate for SRE to be broadened to include the teaching of non religious worldviews such as atheism or humanism. This would provide parents with options that fall into the same type of learning as is the case now between different religious providers. This allows for more children to be catered for within the SRE framework and removes the discrimination issues mentioned before.

8. In deciding whether or not to repeal the legislation regarding SEE it is not enough to consider how beneficial the course is to the children who participate. The question of discrimination and the compromising of SRE as the default option must be also be addressed. The provision of SEE in the SRE timeslot compromises the right of all parents, whatever their own faith, to have their children receive special religious instruction in a timeslot set aside for that purpose alone.