

**Submission
No 270**

INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011

Name: Ms Michele Corin

Date received: 24/02/2012

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

To: The Honourable Maria Ficarra

Re: Inquiry to investigate ethics classes

As a parent and co-founder of **parents4ethics** I strongly oppose the suggested repeal of the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010.

My objection is based on a number of grounds:

1. Strong parent support across NSW for introducing ethics classes

In less than 6 months during 2010, over 130 P&Cs across the state voted on a motion to change DET's policy to include ethics classes as a complement to SRE classes. I believe many more P&Cs voted in favour of the change to DET's policy but did not advise **parents4ethics** of their vote. After the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act was passed in November 2010, **parents4ethics** no longer thought it necessary to monitor and keep track of P&Cs voting.

Not a single P&C voted against the change to DET's policy. 100% of school P&Cs that voted on this issue, voted in favour of change to allow ethics classes to be taught.

To get 130 P&Cs to vote in 4-5 month timeframe is a huge achievement. P&Cs are run by volunteers with limited time to discuss complex issues such as ethics. Parents resoundingly have shown they want the right to have a choice!

In June 2010, **parents4ethics** started communicating about ethics. As parents, we had struggled to find information about the availability of ethics classes, what was happening with the class trials etc so we decided to create an internet forum with specific information about ethics classes. Within weeks people were asking how they could join our group. Within 6 months our supporter base had grown to over 1000 people from varied careers and backgrounds. Some were university students, some grandparents, and many were parents. Our numbers were starting to grow exponentially when we decided (post legislation being passed in November 2010) that there was no need to continue as an active lobby group.

The independent review of the trial ethics classes, conducted in 2010, also demonstrates strong public support for ethics with 98% of submissions in favour.

Further evidence of support for ethics classes is a poll conducted by the Sydney Morning Herald on 4 August, 2011. Of 26,744 respondents, over 92% were in favour of ethics classes.

It appears to be the opinion of the minority that have requested this inquiry be held. The majority are in favour of ethics and do not comprehend that the repeal of the legislation is even a consideration of the current government.

2. Discrimination against children

Should children who do not attend SRE be discriminated against for not having the opportunity to learn about moral behaviour? Prior to ethics being offered as a complement to SRE, many children sat in a classroom (if their school was lucky enough to have a spare room) doing nothing. Perhaps watching the same DVD every week and maybe did some colouring-in. That's if they were lucky. Some of the stories **parents4ethics** were told by parents, shocked us eg picking up rubbish, sitting in a hallway outside the Principal's office as if the child was on detention. Who were these children? At some schools they were children whose parents had a faith not offered at the school because there were limited numbers in the area (perhaps Islam, Judaism where there were not many other families of the same faith in the area). They may have been children of parents who wanted other religious options for their children. Some of them may be children of atheists or agnostics. All of these parents want their children to learn to be morally upright citizens, ethics provides them with that teaching.

Children who attend SRE classes are instructed on ways to lead a morally good life, what about the children who do not attend SRE? Some may argue that **all** children should attend SRE, but it is a parents' right to make that choice, raising their children as they think is best for their family. Wouldn't every government want to provide a moral alternative for parents who do not want their children to attend SRE. Providing ethics classes means that every child has an opportunity to learn about moral behaviour not just the groups that attend SRE. Providing moral instruction will have long-term benefits to society. Yes, I am aware ethics is part of the curriculum, but surely we all benefit from more teaching on this topic.

Taking away ethics classes would mean that children would once again be discriminated against. If the committee recommends that ethics be made available to all students as part of the curriculum, the situation returns to ground zero with children continuing to do nothing while some children attend SRE. This is what we, as parents, have been fighting against. We want choice! The discrimination will continue against children who do not attend SRE. Once again children will be left doing nothing, learning nothing while their counterparts are attending scripture classes.

3. Opportunity for educative exploration

Providing ethics classes as an option means that all students have the opportunity to learn about different religions and ethos. Some parents may elect to have their children study different religious options (including ethics) each term (or terms) at school. Providing variety and a broad spectrum of educational experiences is what parents expect.

Perhaps one recommendation the committee may consider is introducing GRE (General Religious Education) instead of SRE. GRE is offered in other states eg SA and provides an overall perspective on different religions. The introduction of a course like GRE would mean students' knowledge and understanding of different cultures would grow and so enhance the multi-cultural society in which we live.

4. Ethics is not a threat to SRE

In 2010, the Anglican and Catholic churches were concerned about 'losing' SRE students to ethics classes. Much of the media focus was on the potential tussle that would occur if ethics classes were introduced with the potential transfer of SRE students to ethics classes. This has not occurred. In fact both the Anglican and Catholic churches were quoted in July 2011 in the SMH (see attached article) as having reversed their position on ethics classes and saying that ethics classes have 'little impact' on the

teaching of scripture. In fact Bryan Cowling, from the Anglican Education Commission, was quoted as saying that the ethics curriculum is 'good educational stuff'. He continued to say, 'we've got no evidence that introducing the ethics classes has done anything to reduce the number of SRE classes.' He went on to say 'removing the classes would be 'undemocratic' and Mr Nile's proposal risked throwing the whole area into turmoil, so 'ultimately [that] could mean SRE could disappear altogether. I don't think his position can be defended on the basis of fairness'.

I totally concur with Dr Cowling's comments and wish that such wisdom prevailed with the Christian Democrats.

5. Recent review of ethics classes

Post the trial in 2010, an extensive review of ethics classes was conducted by an independent evaluator, Dr Sue Knight. The findings were incredibly positive. It found that SRE and ethics classes were complementary and could co-exist. Based on that review, ethics classes were implemented. Why is another review necessary 18 months later? Why are ethics classes under so much scrutiny? SRE classes have been running since the 19th century with no formal investigation in over 200 years. It is time to have SRE classes reviewed! It is only fair that everyone is treated consistently.

6. Discrimination against ethics classes

Most school Principals have followed DET's hazy guidelines in communicating with parents about the availability of ethics classes. The different ways Principals have advised the school community about ethics classes has often depended on the Principal's own personal beliefs and values. Rather than playing the facilitator role of providing information, the Principal has often made it very difficult for parents to find out about the availability of ethics classes. It has often been very frustrating for the ethics teachers to communicate to the school community about the availability of classes.

An agreed approach needs to be followed by all Principals (without prejudice). All parents need to be made aware of the opportunity for their children to attend ethics classes. Consistency is key!

7. The current government has made a commitment to ethics classes

In all the communication I have received from the current government, there is a strong commitment to continue ethics classes. I am confident the government will uphold their promise and continue to offer ethics classes. My only concern is that if this committee recommends that ethics classes become part of the curriculum, the situation returns to the previous status quo and once again there will be many students left doing nothing while other students are at scripture. Every parent wants their child to be engaged and learning during school hours.

8. Short time frame for responses – again another case of discrimination

If the committee wanted to conduct a legitimate review, it would have thought more about the timing of submission deadlines. Advising the community on 10 December (one week before school's break up for summer holidays) that the deadline for submission was 24 February (three weeks after returning from holidays) limited most people's ability to submit in the timeframe. Most P&Cs did NOT have the opportunity to discuss the issue at a scheduled P&C meeting. If school P&Cs were to submit by the deadline, an extra ordinary meeting needed to be held. Many parents would not even be aware of the inquiry. The opportunity for communication has been limited because of the school holiday break.

9. Roll out of ethics classes not complete

How can a proper inquiry into ethics classes be conducted when the program is only available to Years 5&6 in a small number of schools around the state? Introducing a new program into schools takes years to occur – as The Department of Education experiences with their school programs.

The demand for ethics classes is high and parents around the state want ethics classes taught at their child's school. There are still many parents who are not aware of the availability of ethics classes or the process involved with regard to implementation. Building awareness takes time. There are also many Principals who are not aware of the process (and some who are blocking the process). It will take time and investment for Primary Ethics to follow due process with implementation and ensure that all volunteers are comprehensively trained.

Just as with SRE, the program is reliant on volunteers. The schools where the program is taught depend on volunteers being available to co-ordinate, as well as teach. The process of implementation by Primary Ethics will take a number of years. Once ethics classes are firmly established then a comprehensive review should be conducted.

Let ethics classes have the opportunity to prove their value before conducting the next inquiry. Give Primary Ethics the opportunity to roll out the program to all years and the majority of NSW schools before they are assessed again. Maybe in 200 years' time?

In the interests of equality and fairness, I request that a similar inquiry be conducted on SRE classes. They have been operating for 200 years and should be subjected to the same degree of scrutiny.

Other terms of reference – objectives, curriculum

I am unable to comment on these areas on the terms to reference, other than to mention that the curriculum (as I have already stated) is only available to children in Years 5&6. My son is in Year 2 so is not part of the group that has access to ethics classes. I volunteered at the local school to help with ethics co-ordination or to teach the curriculum to Years 5&6. Although there was some interest in making ethics classes available at the school, the numbers were considered too small to run a class. The class size for Years 5&6 was only 19 in total, so very small numbers. As a result I have not completed any ethics training and am therefore not familiar with the curriculum, objectives etc.

I, like many **parents4ethics** supporters, am disappointed that once again we have to defend the introduction of ethics classes. There are so many **parents4ethics** supporters (including me) who have spent countless hours writing, ringing and visiting MPs, sending letters and articles to media, presenting at P&C meetings, talking with friends to let them know the current status quo on issues. Most people believed when the legislation was passed in November 2010, that ethics classes were here to stay. It is only the smallest of minorities who have objected to ethics classes and have forced the need for this inquiry. Please do not let the minority rule the majority.

Yours sincerely

Michele Corin

Nile isolated as Anglicans back ethics classes

Leesha Mckenny, Sean Nicholls

July 21, 2011



Learning a moral foundation without religion ... students attend an ethics class at Hilltop Primary School in Merrylands. *Photo: Wolter Peeters*

THE leading opponent to the introduction of ethics classes in NSW schools, the Anglican Church, has reversed its position and says they should be retained, while the Catholic Church now argues they should not be removed as they have "little impact" on the teaching of scripture.

The reversals come amid a stand-off over the classes between the O'Farrell government and the Christian Democratic Party MP, Fred Nile, who has threatened to block key legislation in the upper house if it does not consider removing them from schools.

The comments will be welcomed by the government, which yesterday rejected Mr Nile's proposal that the classes be moved from being in competition with special religious education (SRE), or scripture, lessons.

The acting Premier, Andrew Stoner, said the proposal was "problematic and very unlikely to find support" from the government.

Bryan Cowling from the Anglican Education Commission, the church's peak education body in the Sydney diocese, told the *Herald* the church had consulted with the O'Farrell government. "Once the thing had gone through we saw that as the reality and we need to make sure we work within it," he said.

"I'm comfortable with the current arrangements and so is the Anglican Church."

Dr Cowling said there had been a fear among religious providers before the classes were introduced that they might be a vehicle of getting rid of special religious education altogether.

"I've seen the curriculum, which none of the churches had seen before the legislation went through and, having seen the curriculum, it's nothing to be frightened of," he said. "It's good educational stuff."

"We've got no evidence that introducing the ethics classes has done anything to reduce the number of SRE classes."

But Dr Cowling said removing the classes would be "undemocratic" and Mr Nile's proposal risked throwing the whole area into turmoil, so "ultimately [that] could mean SRE could disappear altogether," he said. "I don't think his position can be defended on the basis of fairness."

Jude Hennessy, the spokesman for the Catholic Conference of Religious Education in State Schools, said the church had also dropped its opposition to the classes. Mr Hennessy said while Mr Nile's move to have the classes removed from schools was "no doubt an expression of his strong support" for scripture, "the implementation of ethics classes has progressed too far to warrant this action".

He said the debate had prompted an increase in the number of volunteer scripture teachers, while there had been limited take-up of ethics classes, which are running in 128 primary schools with 180 teachers: "The implementation of ethics classes in a limited number of school communities has had little impact on the teaching of SRE."

Last night Mr Nile expressed surprise and disagreed with the view that ethics classes had not affected scripture lessons. "I've been getting information from the grassroots in schools saying [ethics] is having an effect."

He told the *Herald* he understood that Mr Stoner did not want to announce changes to government policy while the Premier, Barry O'Farrell, was in China and looked forward to his meeting with him next week.

When ethics classes were introduced at Hilltop Road Public School in Merrylands last term, its Catholic scripture alternative lost one student. But Charlie Gregory, 10, who said the classes were more fun than scripture, also had some other reasons.

"My dad's the teacher," he said.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/nile-isolated-as-anglicans-back-ethics-classes-20110720-1hp05.html#ixzz1nGbm5i00>