

Submission
No 294

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

Organisation: Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc.
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*Australian Council
of State School
Organisations Inc.*

The Director

General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2

Parliament House

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The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the peak national organisation representing the interests of the parents, families and school communities of more than two million children attending government schools throughout Australia. ACSSOs formal structure currently comprises of State and Territory peak government school organisations and their membership networks

ACSSO believes that it is the responsibility of schools and the school system to ensure equity of access to an appropriate range of opportunities for all students. All children have the right to schooling which gives them independent access to knowledge as well as the skills and understanding necessary to shape their own lives and to participate in shaping the society in which they live.

ACSSO is committed to the principles of access and equity

ACSSO's interest in the inquiry is directly related to the fact that as the national public school parent organisation we support the interest of parents in public schools and in particular that of the affiliates of our organisation.

It is well known and discussed by ACSSO affiliates the concern for students who were not participating in SRE. This does not mean that ACSSO wishes to remove SRE from our schools but rather ensure that young people were engaged in a meaningful alternative during this time.

We are fully aware that many students are left idle, sitting in offices of executive staff, watching videos or left to their own devices in libraries or "spare classrooms". The policy did not allow for any further learning but rather "completing homework" or reading. Young people were not given any meaningful direction or a place to discuss or explore their belief systems.

For some students their particular faith is not offered during SRE time and for others their parents chose to "opt out" of SRE. These young people in a sense were discriminated against by not being allowed to do anything meaningful. As parents "homework" is meant for home not as "busy work".

ACSSO has a number of state affiliates currently looking at this.

ACSSO has supported the NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW in their lobbying of the previous NSW government for the implementation of an "ethics class" as a



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meaningful alternative to SRE. We believe there is a great deal of parent support for these classes. We also feel a thorough process was followed to ensure that the course reflected the desire of parents in NSW Public Schools. We are aware of the following events that led up to the introduction of these classes:

- In 2003 /4 Simon Longstaff presented to the NSW P&C about the possibility of an ethics course and noted that there was a need for change in policy of the NSW Department of Education and Training.
- In 2005 a motion was put to the Annual Conference of the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW to provide an ethics course for students not attending special religious education.

Those resolutions were:

1. *That it is the right of students whose families choose to exclude them from special religious education to have access to an alternative ethics program approved by the Department of Education and Training. (Item 55)*
2. *That the Department of Education and Training initiates with the NSW Board of Studies the development of an ethics education syllabus for voluntary implementation in NSW public schools. The syllabus to complement the religious teachings currently offered in special religious education but to have a non-theological basis. (Item 56)*
3. *That in order to fulfil supervision requirements, supplementary staffing be provided by the Department of Education and Training to schools that choose to implement the approved ethics program as an alternative to special religious education. (Item 57)*

- In 2006 the NSW P&C Federation conducted a survey of parents which identified overwhelming support for the introduction of these classes by parents
- The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW over the next few years unsuccessfully lobbied for this alternative to SRE to be introduced
- NSW P&C gained support from the NSW Greens.
- In July 2009 the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW endorsed the proposal for a pilot study developed by St James Ethics Centre
- In September the Minister was given a formal proposal from both St James Ethics Centre and the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW for an ethics trial.
- In December 2009, the then Premier, The Honourable Nathan Rees MP, announced the approval of a trial ethics program as an alternative to special religious education.
- Ethics Trial working party was established in December 2009 to develop the protocols and strategies of the trial. This working party had representation from the St James Ethics Centre, NSW P&C, Department of Education and Training and of course Phil Cam, University of NSW.
- The trial was involved students from Years 5 and 6 in ten schools over two terms.



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- What followed that announcement was a great deal of debate and misinformation in regards the purpose of the trial but a trial ethics course was conducted by St James Ethics Centre in partnership with the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW during Term 2, 2010.
- In the trial ten schools participated: Baulkham Hills North Public School; Bungendore Public School; Crown Street Public School; Darlinghurst Public School; Ferncourt Public School; Haberfield Public School; Hurstville Public School; Leichhardt Public School; Randwick Public School; Rozelle Public School.
- In February 2010 a two day training session was held for the volunteer ethics teachers. Each of them also had a police check.
- The working party provided a copy of the curriculum used in the trial was provided to the Board of Studies NSW for comment mostly regarding age appropriateness of the lesson content.
- An independent evaluation of the ethics trial was undertaken by Dr Sue Knight, from the University of South Aust. The trial was evaluated extremely highly with over 95% support for the introduction.

In November 2010 the NSW Minister, Verity Firth introduced and parliament passed the Education Amendment (Ethics) Bill 2010 allowing ethics classes as an alternative for those students not attending SRE.

As parents in the public education system that the introduction of ethics in government schools is about parental choice during the SRE timeslot in what is meant to be a secular system. The introduction of ethics classes in NSW Public Schools is in response to parental concerns about no productive or constructive engagement in learning during for those young people who "opt out of" SRE or do not have access to their faith at their school. We do not see ethics classes as a criticism of SRE or as a move to remove SRE, but rather a viable alternative. Ethics classes should remain a choice as does SRE.

The Australian Council of School Organisations was appalled to learn in July 2011 that the Premier of New South Wales was bowing to the pressure of the Reverend Fred Nile in regard to the legislation surrounding ethics classes.

As a national organisation we saw the NSW government as providing an exemplar in listening to the parent voice. This move took schools into the mix of 21st Century Australia; noting the many faiths and the proportion of people who declare no religious affiliation. Ethics classes a forum for many of these young people to examine their thoughts and beliefs and further develop critical thinking skills as the SRE class does for the faith based child.

ACSSO was appalled by Rev Nile's move and see it as bullying and unethical behaviour in its purest form.



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ACSSO calls upon the NSW government to uphold its election commitment to the parents in NSW Public Schools by honouring the legislation to allow these classes to be held as a meaningful option for students opting out of special religious education.

Peter Garrigan

PRESIDENT

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