

**Submission
No 134**

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

Organisation: Parents4Ethics

Date received: 10/02/2012



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

10th February 2012

To: The Hon Maria Ficarra

Re: Inquiry to Investigate Ethics Classes

Parents4ethics is a group of over 1000 New South Wales parents united in their support of ethics classes as an option for children who do not attend special religious education (SRE) classes. We respect and defend the right of parents and children to choose to attend either a faith-based or secular class during the SRE period, and to learn ethics in a meaningful context. We would like to see balance and tolerance prevail in our public schools and we want the estimated 1 in 4 children who opted out of SRE in 2010 to continue to have the right to ethical reflection.

Our group formed in 2010 (when ethics classes were in their pilot phase) with the aim of providing a network and voice for parents with this common view. The group began with four co-founders and rapidly grew to its current size. Parents4ethics members strongly support ethics classes because they ensure that children who opt out of SRE classes in the public school system have a meaningful alternative. We are all in favour of a meaningful, worthwhile option to SRE classes and are opposed to the discrimination inherent in the pre-2011 SRE system in which state government policy prevented children who opt out of SRE classes from learning during that period.

Over the past two years, our members have shared via our web site (www.parents4ethics.org) their experiences and views of the SRE system and the impact it has on their children in the public school system. These online discussions provide a unique overview of the need for ethics classes to continue to be offered to children who opt out of SRE classes.

Views and Experiences of NSW Parents

A Northern beaches parent describes how her child was required to sit on a bench outside the Principal's office during SRE classes, as this was the only place where supervision was possible without any danger of the child learning during this period. Another member describes personal experience of spending the SRE period playing with the other children who opted out of SRE in the school library, within sight of the librarian who could not interact because learning could not take place. A Christian parent whose child preferred to opt out of SRE shares a similar experience of a non-scripture class, with her child being told to "take one sheet of paper, sit in a Year Six classroom



and amuse herself". As you know, this lack of learning was not within the schools' control, since it was imposed by government policy.

A parent whose child was about to start school commented: "I had a Christian upbringing myself, but I strongly believe that it should not be part of the secular school system and I am amazed that this hasn't been questioned and remedied in the past in this state. The very idea that outside religious groups have unfettered access to the developing minds of our children is simply beyond belief." A parent of two children in a Seven Hills school states "It is unacceptable and discriminatory that what my children are allowed to do (or not do) during SRE time is dictated by those who hold a belief system very different from my own and that of my family."

A Newcastle parent states "I feel that there is an urgent need for an alternative class at the time SRE is held. Contrary to opinions expressed by some of the churches, these classes should be open to any child at their parent's discretion, not just those that do not attend SRE. Many parents like me would move their child to the ethics class. An assumption that parents who send their kids to SRE would not consider an alternative, and should not even have it offered, is grossly untrue. This is nothing more or less than the churches trying to maintain their hold on young impressionable minds at a time when they do not question what is known and what is taken on faith."

A generally held view among our membership is that the pre-2011 SRE system, with children who opted out of SRE prevented by state government policy from learning during that period, was discriminatory and entirely unacceptable. We all warmly welcomed ethics classes when the necessary legislation was passed, and were extremely disappointed to find that only one year later an inquiry was established to consider whether to repeal the legislation.

Evidence of Support for Ethics Classes

On July 24th 2010, while ethics classes were in their pilot phase, we (the parents4ethics co-founders) and a group of other concerned parents attended the annual NSW P&C Federation conference at Parramatta. We proposed the following motion: **"That the NSW Federation of P&C Associations call upon the New South Wales Minister for Education to amend the policy of the Department of Education and Training to allow secular ethics classes to operate as a complement to Special Religious Education in all New South Wales public schools."**

We were astounded by the overwhelming support we received from attendees at the conference. While exact numbers were not recorded, we estimate that the vote was about 200 in favour and no more than 10 against.

We subsequently invited public school P&Cs to discuss the proposed introduction of ethics classes and to consider expressing their support for the classes as an option for children not attending SRE



classes. Within just a few months, at least 130¹ public primary schools across the state had passed the following motion: ***“That the NSW Minister for Education changes DET’s policy to allow secular ethics classes to operate as a complement to scripture/SRE classes in NSW primary schools.”***

We know of no school at which the motion was proposed and not passed.

In view of the fact that the process of proposing a motion at a school P&C meeting can be intimidating and requires considerable time and effort on the part of busy parents, this demonstrates strong support from NSW parents for ethics classes as an option for children not attending SRE.

Further strong evidence of support for ethics classes as an option for children not attending SRE was provided by a Sydney Morning Herald poll on 4th August 2011. Of 26,744 respondents, an overwhelming 92% were in favour of ethics classes.

It is noteworthy and relevant to this inquiry that major church groups, in particular the Anglican and Catholic churches, have openly withdrawn their opposition to ethics classes as an alternative to SRE. The opposition leading to the current inquiry came from a small but vocal group.

Negligence of SRE and Discrimination against Ethics Classes

We welcome the current critique of ethics classes; any educational program should of course be reviewed on a regular basis. Quite correctly, ethics classes were reviewed thoroughly by an independent assessor from the University of South Australia during their 10-week trial across ten NSW schools. Shamefully, however, the SRE program has existed since the 19th century as part of the state education system without any review by the Department of Education. Despite this the current inquiry seeks only to re-examine ethics classes, and not to examine SRE classes at all. We find the selective nature of the inquiry puzzling and discriminatory. The latter is compounded by the fact that the government has agreed to provide an annual celebration of SRE classes to acknowledge the efforts of SRE teachers. It is divisive and discriminatory to acknowledge the efforts of only this one group of volunteers in the state school system. Any such state-supported and sponsored celebration of SRE class volunteers should at least include ethics class volunteers since these classes are part of the same program.

In light of the above points, we submit that the Committee of Inquiry should recommend:

- *That ethics classes are maintained as an alternative to SRE classes, ensuring that children who opt out of SRE classes continue to have this worthwhile option.*

¹ We stopped counting at this point, because legislation was passed to allow the introduction of ethics classes; we know from communication with parents that the motion was to be proposed at literally dozens of other schools.



- *That SRE classes should be subject to the same process of inquiry and examination currently under way for ethics classes.*
- *That SRE class volunteers are not singled-out for a state-supported annual celebration, and that celebration and acknowledgement should extend at least to ethics class volunteers and preferably to all public school volunteers.*

We are all happy to be contacted for further comment (see email address below).

Yours sincerely

Michele Corin, David Hill, Catherine Suttle, Tara Thomas and Russell Wyatt

www.parents4ethics.org