

Submission  
No 292

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

**Organisation:** NSW Primary Principals' Association

**Date received:** 24/02/2012

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# NSW Primary Principals' Association Submission to the NSW Legislative Council **General Purpose Standing Committee Number 2**

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## Inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011

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### **Introduction**

The NSW Primary Principals' Association (NSWPPA) is a professional association for Primary Principals of Public Schools throughout New South Wales with a membership of over 1800 Principals.

This submission summarizes the position of the NSWPPA and is consistent with the Association's views and opinions on the subject of this inquiry, as discussed at local Area and State Council Meetings.

This submission is authorized by Mr. Jim Cooper, President of the NSWPPA.

#### Contact:

Jim Cooper (NSWPPA President)  
Principal, Albion Park PS

#### Or:

Geoff Scott (NSWPPA Vice President)  
Principal, Blacktown South PS

## Terms of Reference One:

**The stated objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness and other related matters pertaining to the current operation of 'special education in ethics' being conducted in State schools**

### KEY ISSUES

The NSW Primary Principals' Association (NSWPPA) supported the trial of 'Ethics Classes' in a number of Government Primary Schools in 2010, with a number of provisos including:

- Schools, Principals and parent communities agreeing to the conducting of the classes;
- Classes being offered to all students in Years 5 and 6 not currently attending Special Religious Education (SRE) lessons at those school;
- Curriculum content being approved by the NSW Board of Studies;
- The trial being conducted, via a contractual arrangement with the NSW Education Department (formerly DET, now DEC), by the St James Ethics Centre, with the support of the NSW Federation of P&C Associations;
- Conduct of the classes not interfering in any way with the normal teaching and learning occurring in the school;
- The NSW Education Department monitoring the trial and providing opportunity for participating schools and communities to evaluate the trial and make recommendations.

Following the evaluation of the trial, which indicated strong support about the curriculum content and effectiveness of the program from the Principals, schools and parent communities involved, the NSWPPA indicated our support for the 'Ethics Classes' to be offered more widely in 2011 to schools where the Principal and parent community expressed interest in participating in the program. Again, the support of the NSWPPA was contingent upon certain guidelines, policies and practices being adhered to, including:

- Schools who wished to, offering a course in philosophical ethics as an option for students whose parents did not want them to attend SRE;
- The ethics curriculum providing a secular framework for examining ethical questions, through argument and justification, to develop understanding about ethical behaviours and decisions;
- The St James Ethics Centre being the initially approved provider of classes in philosophical ethics, with its subsidiary, *Primary Ethics*, being responsible for all aspects of course delivery, including providing trained volunteers and resources;
- The program making philosophical ethics available in Years 5-6 from Term 1, 2011 and progressively rolling out from Year 6 to Kindergarten as program capabilities increased;
- Ongoing evaluation of the program to ascertain its effectiveness.

In many Public Schools, there are increasing numbers of students placed in non-SRE groups while SRE lessons are being conducted. The reasons for this are in part due to more parents, on enrolment, not indicating a wish for their child to be identified as belonging to a particular faith or denomination, but also due to the inability of some SRE providers to have sufficient local SRE teachers and volunteers to take classes. Prior to the 'Ethics Classes' trial, the only option for non-SRE students during SRE lesson times was to engage in 'time-filling' activities often of little relevance to their learning.

'Ethics Classes', according to the evaluation of the trial program, gave schools an opportunity to offer a similar learning opportunity to students attending both SRE lessons and 'Ethics Classes'. Both of these opportunities are, of course, in addition to the regular curriculum in which all students participate, including units of work on Human Society & Its Environment, values, Personal Development, Health & Physical Education.

The NSWPPA believes children should continue to be placed in an SRE class of the faith and denomination notified by parents on enrolment. If parents request otherwise, or a class of their faith or denomination is not available, parents should have the choice of enrolling their child in a class of another faith, to withdraw their child from SRE, or where the school has an Ethics Program established, to participate in this program. Principals should be able to continue to negotiate time for SRE with their SRE providers in the usual way and where 'Ethics Classes' are an option to SRE the program should operate during the time negotiated for SRE.

## **Terms of Reference Two**

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

#### **KEY ISSUES**

The NSWPPA is supportive of the Government's current initiative, entitled "Local Schools, Local Decisions", which aims to develop a structure across NSW Government Schools to support more local decision-making by Principals on behalf of their school community. Principals, working in partnership with parents and carers, should have the authority to offer educational programs that meet the needs of their students and reflect community standards. The provision of an option for parents and carers to choose to have their child participate in 'Ethics Classes' as an alternative learning opportunity to SRE seems to the Association, to be an example of local schools making appropriate decisions to meet community needs.

The NSWPPA believes that schools should have an increasing authority, in consultation with their parent community, to choose appropriately approved courses and programs for their students. The repeal of the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010, if this means the removal of the right for schools and parents to offer programs that replace 'time-filling' activities when SRE is either not requested or not available, would be seen by Principals as being a retrograde step in providing learning options for students.