

Submission  
No 325

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

**Name:** Name suppressed

**Date received:** 23/02/2012

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Partially Confidential

**RE: EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS) ACT 2010**

To the GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO.2,

I am writing this submission as someone who has taken a keen interest in the SRE/Ethics debate since 2009. Although I do teach SRE in Public Schools, I am also a supporter of many volunteers who come into public schools. I do not write this submission in any professional capacity. I write as a father of four school-aged children who have attended public schools for their entire education.

As outlined below, I have some objections to the way Ethics Classes have been enacted in NSW.

My Objections can be summarised under the following headings

1. *Lack of Curriculum Accountability and Availability.*
2. *Unknown Nature of Local Volunteers .*
3. *Misleading Name of “Ethics”.*
4. *The Ethics Course’s Inability to Solve the Problem of Opting-Out students.*

In opposing the current legislation I do not want to oppose the teaching of ethics at all. Teaching of Ethics can fit into schooling provided it is done in an open and proper way.

**1. *Lack of Ethics Curriculum Accountability and Availability***

I believe that this legislation was hurried through parliament without adequate public feedback or review of the ethics curriculum. A pilot program was conducted in certain Sydney schools in the first half of 2010 with a review by an academic (Dr Knight). At the time of the pilot programme, there was some confusion about who could attend the classes.

Much of the confusion leads from the lack of curriculum detail from Ethics advocates themselves. My following comments record my attempts to access the entire ethics curriculum – they are not meant to personally attack anyone involved in ethics advocacy. In the parliamentary submission made in September 2009 the St James Ethics Centre stated that “Course content developed for the pilot would be made available, free of charge, to all interested parties.”<sup>1</sup> The Pilot Programme was, as I understand, the initial 10 lesson ethics course. That 10 lesson pilot has a curriculum. It is not stretching things to suggest the course content means the whole curriculum and “all interested parties” should include interested parents and members of the public.

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<sup>1</sup> Request for ministerial approval to proceed with a Pilot Project to test the concept of offering an Ethics-based Complement to Scripture in NSW Primary Schools For the consideration of the Hon Verity Firth MP, NSW Minister for Education and Training/NSW Minister for Women by the St. James Ethics Centre (Sept 2009).

During February of 2011 I made efforts to obtain that material through email contact with the St James Ethics Centre and the *Primary Ethics* Website. After some email correspondence with ethics advocates, I then contacted Primary Ethics who told me that the curriculum was only available to *education boards* (whatever they are) of church groups<sup>2</sup>. The *Primary Ethics* website currently states (as of 30/1/12) that “Primary Ethics is the owner of the curriculum materials we use. They are an asset that we do not release publicly.”<sup>3</sup> The statements of September 2009 (the original Ethics submission to parliament), February 2011 (my email enquiries) and January 2012 (*Primary Ethics* website) are completely at odds with each other.

As a parent of public school attending children I believe the statements of ethics advocates have been profoundly mistaken and may be seen to be misleading. The curriculum should be widely available for any parent to peruse. By comparison, SRE curriculum material is widely available and can be ordered online through links on the ICCOREIS website or through denominational publishers (such as *CEP - Connect* (Anglican) and *Burst Resources* (Baptist) - two widely taught curricula).

If a parent cannot access the entire ethics curriculum how can a parent make an informed choice for their child? The Ethics advocates will counter that by saying that a couple of sample lessons are available online and can be perused. That is not good enough. For such a new and important initiative *all of the curriculum* should be made available as per their claims when submitting their parliamentary submission of September 2009.

Lack of availability sets a dangerous precedent. When Primary Ethics wish to “roll out” further curriculum it is a must that all the curriculum material be widely available for public scrutiny. The current Primary Ethics curriculum may seem innocuous enough: but when and if high school curriculum material is released a whole raft of issues to do with morality, religion and sexual ethics may be canvassed. These issues are “hot button issues” for teenagers.

It would be a courageous parliamentarian who voted to approve such curriculum material without it being widely available.

This curriculum material will be controversial and therefore must be released to the public for review. Wide and open availability of the ethics curriculum should be a prerequisite for a new and largely unknown group to be permitted access into our schools. I was surprised and disappointed when the Ethics course stakeholders appeared, despite earlier assurances, to not follow through on making the whole curriculum

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<sup>2</sup> Primary Ethics cannot authorise or permit anyone to do activities outside of this licence. Primary Ethics may only use these materials in connection with a twenty weeks ethics program for Years 5 and 6 conducted in: 1. NSW public primary schools; and 2. Faith based groups for the teaching of Scripture in NSW public primary schools. Accordingly, our licence does not allow the provision of a copy of the curriculum materials to any party other than a faith-based group for the purpose set out above. The Education Board of each faith-based group, including yours, may apply to Primary Ethics for a copy of the curriculum materials by sending me a request on its letterhead.

<sup>3</sup> “Primary Ethics is the owner of the curriculum materials we use. They are an asset that we do not release publicly.” <http://www.primaryethics.com.au/faq.html> Accessed 30/1/12

widely available. This detracts from their perceived trustworthiness as providers of curriculum material for an ethics course.

## ***2. Unknown Nature of Local Volunteers***

Many public schools are in regional NSW. Many city-based initiatives and treated with wariness in the bush. A city based organisation sending volunteer ethics teachers into schools may be viewed unfavourably by schools. While there are city-based organisations who work in our schools (e.g. Life Education etc), *Primary Ethics* are a new and little-known group. As far as I understand they are an offshoot of the SJEC set up to teach ethics in our schools. They are a private organisation with their own agenda, some stated aims on their website but with no history in our schools. They are not a community based organisation like local church groups with links in the local schools through children and youth and community activities.

While it is true that many Church groups have city based head offices, they are all at their core local community groups made up of local community people with an interest in these schools where many of them have children or grandchildren attending.

It is also true that ethics teachers may have children at these schools; they still enter the school lacking a local community focus and represent a little-known organisation set up in a volatile political climate in our state. While it does not disqualify them from entering our schools, it does detract from their perceived trust in a school community. A better way forward is for class teachers themselves teach a department of education ethics curriculum rather than little known volunteers teaching ethics. Or perhaps to have ethics volunteers register as members of local groups such as Rotary. Religious instruction in schools has a long and well known history, having a new set of volunteers teach their own “ethics” (and the term “ethics” is far too ill-defined a term) will detract from class teachers who surely are better placed to teach ethics.

## ***3. Misleading Name of “Ethics”***

The term “Ethics” is potentially misleading. Just about everyone whether they know it or not live by some sort of ethical system. What sort of ethical system is “Ethics” teaching? It may be best defined as “philosophical enquiry” but it really needs a better definition. Perhaps calling it “Secular Ethics” is clearer but either way the term “Ethics” needs a more precise definition. Children in our schools are taught systems of ethics everyday through the general ethos of the school to class rules and conduct. I cannot really judge *Primary Ethics* ethical standpoint, but everyone has some sort of basis for what they believe and teach. So therefore I think the name of the course needs to be better defined so that it is not seen as some sort of cover all for ethics.

#### ***4. The Ethics Course's Inability to Solve the Problem of Opting-Out students***

Much was made by ethics advocates of their concern for children who chose to “opt out” of SRE classes and what sort of alternatives they have for instruction while SRE is occurring. It was maintained that having Ethics Classes while SRE classes were conducted would solve the problem of children who opt out. They would now attend ethics classes. However, what happens if a child wishes not to attend SRE or Ethics classes? Surely they are free to opt out? Or will they be under pressure to attend ethics classes? Having ethics as an alternative does not solve the original problem. It will certainly give an alternative for parents who want their children to be taught ethics but if parents want neither option (and there will be some parents who will not want anything), then the problem of opting out has not been solved.

A better option would be to allow Primary ethics (and any other philosophical group) to register as a Philosophy/ SRE provider and teach in the normal time just like the Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witness, Muslims, etc.

That would indeed be a level playing field and would also ensure that all groups are treated on an equal footing, rather than the perception that one group has received much more favourable support from government.

#### ***Conclusion***

I am not against Ethics being taught in our schools. However it should be taught in an open and accountable way. Curriculum material should easily and widely available to Mums and Dads of children in public schools. The Ethics Classes should also be treated as SRE time is schools is treated. That is, they should register like any religious group (even though they are not a religion) and simply teach those children whose parents wish them to be taught).

Ethics teachers should come from some sort of recognised local group. This will help overcome wariness of an unknown volunteer representing a little known group. Perhaps even church groups and community groups can be of assistance. That would entail Ethics advocates consulting a little wider with major church groups than they originally did with some faith groups in 2009.

Our schools are great environments for children to learn and discover new ideas and grow into good citizens. It is my hope that they will be more of a place of learning and personal growth and less of an ideological battleground.