

**Submission  
No 234**

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

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# Parliamentary Inquiry into Ethics

Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011

Prepared by Susan Ashton-Davies  
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(as appointed by Primary Ethics)

Dear Committee Members,

I have been associated with Primary Ethics since March 2011.

Firstly, I believe that the provision of special education in ethics currently being conducted in NSW State Schools meets all the stated objectives, curriculum, implementation effectiveness and other related matters pertaining to its current operation.

Secondly, the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should NOT be repealed

## **History of Ethics at Neutral Bay Public School**

The potential option of Ethics was first presented to the P&C on 9 September 2009. At that meeting the P&C agreed to participate in a pilot program to test the concept of offering an Ethics-based Complement to Scripture in NSW Primary Schools. At that time 92 students (12.5% of the population) opt out of scripture each week.

On 8 September 2010 our P&C association wrote to Minister Verity Firth stating that the P&C had passed the following motion:

*Having previously voted in support of the NSW Ethics Trial, but having been prevented from participating owing to building works and logistics, we confirm the P&Cs continued commitment to the proposed introduction of Ethics classes as a complement to scripture/SRE classes in Neutral Bay Public School. Furthermore the P&C hereby agrees to communicate to the NSW Government the P&C's request that: "That the NSW Minister for Education changes DET policy to allow secular ethics classes for children to operate as an option for children who opt-out of scripture/SRE classes in NSW public schools."*

Neutral Bay Public School started Ethics classes April 2011 with two teachers and 35 students. By Term 4 we had expanded to three teachers and 45 students. This year, 2012, we have four teachers and 60 students.

We find that class sizes of 17 or 18 children work best and allow all students to participate in discussions and role plays. The code conduct guidelines for behaviour provided by Primary Ethics work well and provide a structured and healthy framework for children to work together ethically while they learn. In this way they practice ethics while they learning about it.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Neutral Bay Public School Principal, Mrs Gai Collett and the SRE/Ethics Co-Ordinator Mrs Lynne Rabone who have both been extremely supportive of the Ethics program. Classrooms and teaching spaces have been made available together with support identifying those in the school community who would be good teachers.

Since the Ethics classes started Neutral Bay Ethics teachers continue to see the development of each child's ability to think critically. The Ethics Teachers agree that it is very satisfying to see the benefits of engaging children in discussions about real life scenarios and how they form their opinions.

Ethics Teachers have a critical role to play. Their part in this program is more as a facilitator than a teacher. It is very satisfying to see children using strategies for thinking and solving ethical problems. They recognize that life is not always as simple as right and wrong, and that there are often shades of grey that need to be sifted through in order to find the ethical, or right answer for a particular situation.

I receive a lot of positive feed back about Ethics Classes from parents. Although classes are conducted in a different format to regular classroom activities they report that their children are excited to be part of Ethics classes and are not confused by hearing the different opinions of other children in their group.

### **General Comments**

All families have the right to choose how they would like their children's spiritual needs attended to. I have no hesitation in recommending Primary Ethics to any families who have chosen to opt out of special religious education.

Ethics classes have been established in response to families who feel that their needs are not otherwise met during that allocated period either by Special Religious Education (SRE) or "non-scripture" within their primary school. I have absolutely no objection to SRE in our schools and would encourage the committee to also examine each faith's course with the same scrutiny as Ethics Classes to ensure an equally high quality of objectives.

Primary Ethics classes provide children with an alternative to non-scripture while providing a curriculum compatible with that taught in SRE except that it is conducted in a non-religious environment.

Primary Ethics is completely transparent in the manner it facilitates it's Ethics classes in NSW primary schools. All teachers are interviewed for their suitability to be in a classroom, specifically their ability to handle controversial ethical topics without getting emotionally involved.

Children learn to discuss "right from wrong" by discussing many of the same concepts taught by the faith groups and the ideals that Australians, in general, hold in high regard. These include, but are not limited to, the following: caring,

sharing, respect, social justice, fairness, equality, compassion, empathy, self-control.

Every child should live in a society that is based on morality and compassion. Ethics Classes allow and encourage children to think deeply about the difference between right and wrong and the “right thing to do”. In doing so, they also explore their particular beliefs and compare them with alternative beliefs in the safe, caring and controlled environment of a classroom. This serves to open their minds to the broader and ‘greyer’ areas of concepts and provides guidance about when and where to be more flexible or rigid in their decision making.

In my experience of observing Ethics Classes conducted and in my discussions with Primary Ethics I have never been witness to any proselytizing of atheism or any political agendas. Ethics Classes are not a forum for religious or political discussions.

Religion plays an important part in Australia’s cultural and social structure. While Australia is predominately Christian, over time migrants from many differing faiths have brought with them their ancient and varied traditions. These all serve to enrich, improve and promote the diversity within Australia today.

Ultimately, the success of Ethics classes will be judged by families who choose to send their children to Ethics Classes because it suits their spiritual needs and they witness that it develops their children’s faith in mankind.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Regards  
Susan Ashton-Davies