

**Submission  
No 121**

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

**Organisation:** Maroubra Junction Public School Parents & Citizens Association  
**Date received:** 9/02/2012

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## MAROURBRA JUNCTION PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENTS AND CITIZENS ASSOCIATION

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

Dear Sir/Madam,

### **Philosophical Ethics Classes in NSW Public Schools- Inquiry**

I am the President of the Maroubra Junction Public School P&C and I'm writing to you pursuant to a motion passed at our December meeting.

#### **Maroubra Junction Public School (MJPS)**

I am proud to say that MJPS was one of the first schools in NSW to offer philosophical ethics classes to year 5 and 6 students in 2011. We have a fully qualified Ethics Teacher and an Ethics Coordinator appointed in accordance with Primary Ethics requirements. Both of these roles are filled by volunteer parents who have willingly devoted many hours of their time to be appointed to these positions and to be properly trained in order to provide children at our school who elect not to attend special religious education (SRE) classes with a meaningful alternative.

The MJPS year 5 and 6 children who attended philosophical ethics classes in 2011 thoroughly enjoyed the content of these classes and the discussion-based format in which these classes were run. They benefited greatly from having the opportunity to explore philosophical and ethical dilemmas with their peers in a guided manner. The topics covered in the curriculum allowed these children to develop increasingly sophisticated skills in moral reasoning. The children were able to discuss topics that encouraged them to consider and understand the consequences of their actions, to have empathy, to appreciate differences, and the importance of giving equal consideration to differing points of view. These classes are assisting our children to develop well-reasoned moral judgement whilst keeping them engaged with topics that interest them. These reasoning skills will assist them greatly in years to come and should be encouraged not challenged by politically motivated inquires.

#### **The Inquiry**

Consequently, the MJPS P&C was extremely dismayed to learn that the O'Farrell coalition government had decided to renege on its election promise that ethics classes in NSW public schools would be maintained by a coalition government and to refer ethics classes to a parliamentary committee to *consider 'the objectives and effectiveness of the classes, the curriculum and whether the legislation that allows them to be taught as an alternative to special religious education should be repealed'*, less than a year after these classes began.

Philosophical ethics classes were only introduced into NSW public schools after the completion of a very comprehensive trial and the development of a curriculum that was subject to a strict review process. The need for a parliamentary inquiry within such a short time following the introduction of ethics classes appears to be solely motivated by political concerns and not by any fundamental or overriding concern for the educational well being of NSW school children. In fact, consideration of what is in the best interests of our children seems to be at the bottom of the political agenda of those agitating for this inquiry and this is exceedingly unfair to the children of NSW who come from non-religious families.

SRE classes have been operating in NSW public schools since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and have never been the subject of any kind of investigation at all, let alone one that considers the objectives and effectiveness of SRE classes and their curriculum. This is not surprising given there is no set standards for SRE classes and certainly no approved curriculum. Nor are there any training standards for SRE teachers. In these circumstances, the hypocrisy of the decision to refer philosophical ethics classes to a parliamentary inquiry without also referring SRE classes to the same level of scrutiny is profound. It is simply not defensible to carry out this inquiry into philosophical ethics classes without including SRE classes.

It is also of relevance to note that most religious leaders in NSW no longer see philosophical ethics classes as a threat to scripture classes and now support their ongoing provision.

#### Pre Ethics Classes

Prior to the introduction of philosophical ethics classes, families with children attending state secular schools who did not want their children to attend scripture classes had only one option, non-scripture classes where children were deprived of any meaningful lessons and were largely left to colour in, watch DVDs, or do their homework with no assistance or guidance. The rationale for this situation was that it was considered unfair to the children attending scripture for the non-scripture children to be given any meaningful instruction. This situation was patently unfair to the non-scripture children (rather than those attending scripture) and bordered on being ludicrous, particularly given that it was occurring in public **secular** schools.

If the *Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010* is repealed as a result of this Inquiry, there would no longer be a legal requirement to offer ethics classes as an option for children not attending SRE classes. This could return us to a situation in which children opting out of SRE classes are again given nothing meaningful to do. This discriminatory treatment of children from non-religious families is totally unacceptable to thousands of parents, children and other members of the NSW community and simply can't be permitted to occur.

#### The Future

The MJPS P&C, like many other P&C groups in NSW, strongly supports the continuation of philosophical ethics classes in NSW public schools as an alternative to SRE classes to cater for those children who do not attend SRE classes. Accordingly, the MJPS P&C submits that this Committee of Inquiry should:

1. endorse the effectiveness of philosophical ethics classes;
2. endorse the quality of the curriculum for philosophical ethics classes;
3. recommend that no changes be made to the *Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010*;
4. recommend that SRE classes be subject to the same level of scrutiny as philosophical ethics classes; *and*
5. recommend that, like SRE classes, philosophical ethics classes should be celebrated annually to acknowledge the efforts of philosophical ethics teachers and the work of Primary Ethics in getting these classes up and running with no government funding.

Yours sincerely

Justine Jennings  
MJPS P&C President

9 January 2012