

Submission
No 295

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

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Submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2.

Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011 (Inquiry)

I make this submission as a lecturer in ethics at Sydney University, as the editor of a book on Applied Ethics (to be published by Tilde University Press this April), and as a member of the executive committee of the Australian Association for Professional and Applied Ethics.

I am also a coordinator at Ashbury Public School in the current Primary Ethics program

I support the ethics program. I also support religious education, although infinitely preferring a comparative religions class to one devoted to a specific religion.

I suggest in this submission, however that we enlarge and combine both. And that we give the responsibility for the combined class to either the Department of Education and Communities or to Primary Ethics, drawing in those Special Religious Education (SRE) providers that are willing to join in the combined class and teach a comparative religions class

Expanding and combining both programs will bring considerable benefits, personal and professional, to students in our schools, as outlined below

My reasons for expanding the ethics program is that it is currently based on philosophical ethics and as such is lacking in intellectual rigour. Philosophical ethics is based on argument, not observation and research (as can be seen in the current syllabus). The result has been that moral philosophers cannot decide what is right and what is wrong, and have been engaged in "internecine warfare" for a very long time over this issue. Students should be taught to base their thinking on what they, and reliable others, observe and analyse. All school subjects take this approach, except philosophical ethics (and to some extent, religions)

A second reason is that philosophical ethics does not reach into the practicalities of ethical behaviour. It stops at the making of an ethical decision. It ignores ensuring that the end behaviour is ethical. Examples from the adult world, which can be translated into a school child's environment, which are not included in moral philosophy classes even at university level, are

- (i) Whistleblowing, effective and now near compulsory world-wide, but not taught in adult philosophy classes. School equivalent: is should you tell the school who threw the rock through the principal's window?
- (ii) What is clearly right and what is clearly wrong? Is it if we harm anybody? Or anything – such as the school? Is it when we fail to help anybody in difficulties?
- (iii) Codes of ethics. Can we draw up a code of ethical behaviour at the completion of our ethics class? What would it say?
- (iv) Do we ever fool ourselves into thinking our actions are OK,? How? (The adult equivalent is behavioural ethics- not taught as a part of moral philosophy)

My reasons for expanding to a comparative religion program primarily lie in the benefits we all get from religion. There are several:

- (i) Religious beliefs are inherent to mankind, bringing great comfort in times of difficulty to those who believe. Some psychologists assert that religious belief is a necessary (and everlasting) component of human existence
- (ii) All religions have a similar ethical beliefs .The golden rule, either in the form “Do unto others” or “Do not do...” is a tenet of virtually every religion. In the negative form, it also answers the philosophical issue in (ii) above.
- (iii) Behind most charities and help-other groups is a religion of some sort. There are very few exceptions. Even for those that are ostensibly secular, we often find a person with a religious belief.

My reasons for combining the ethics and religion programs

- (i) Religions have a poor history for tolerating non-believers. Even today, much of the current warfare is religion based .Sunnis versus Shias is the outstanding example .Students need to learn that that the religion of their birth is not the only way to conduct their lives.
- (ii) We are a multi-cultural society. Islamist families need to learn to live with Christians, with Buddhists, Jewish people etc. As do the sects in each religion have to live with each other. This state, and this country, will be better off if that learning starts at school.

Peter Bowden (Dr.)

I am willing to elaborate on any of these issues, if needed .I can do so orally, or in writing, providing academic references where needed

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