

**Submission
No 202**

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

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Submission

to the Inquiry

into the

Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill
2011

by

The General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2

of the

Legislative Council

BY

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The Author

The author of this submission, Rev Dr Michael P. Jensen, lectures in theology at Moore Theological College in the Anglican diocese of Sydney. During the debate about 'Special Education in Ethics' in 2009-10, he contributed a number of written pieces to the media on the subject. His doctorate, from the University of Oxford, is in the area of Theological Ethics.

Summary

- My opinion is that there is no need to repeal the 2010 amendment to the Education Act at this time.
- The Education Act should be amended to specify a *minimum* time for SRE.
- Assurances should be given to SRE providers that the SRE 'slot' is not under threat.
- Future proposed syllabuses for Special Education in Ethics should be made available for discussion ahead of time.

1. The debate about the introduction of SEE ('Ethics') that took place over 2009-10 was not an edifying spectacle. On the one hand, it was clear from the many letters to newspapers, the comments on talk-back radio and the heated debates at local P&C meetings that there was a concerted campaign by some to push Ethics as a Trojan Horse against SRE (though this was not the intention of the St James Ethics Centre).
2. Likewise, there was a defensive reaction by SRE providers, who saw the proposed 'Ethics' programme as a hostile move against the longstanding friendly agreement between churches and the NSW government for the teaching of 'Scripture' in public schools.
3. This unnecessarily acrimonious debate was not helped by the unwillingness of those proposing the SEE programme to offer their syllabuses to scrutiny and public comment. The syllabuses were not revealed until the very last moment. It was very unclear to many people what was meant by 'Ethics'.
4. The primary and most reasonable argument offered for the introduction of SEE was the need to provide a meaningful alternative to SRE for those children who opted out, as a matter of justice. Anecdotal (and sometimes lurid) evidence about children watching DVDs and collecting rubbish was put forward. However, the introduction of SEE does not necessarily solve the

alleged problem at all. It is still possible for a child to opt out of both SRE *and* SEE. These children are still not catered for.

5. Despite the grandiose claims made for it by both sides, the Ethics syllabus is simply a course in philosophical reasoning which deliberately attempts to be as neutral as possible. One of the difficulties is that Dr Simon Longstaff from the St James Ethics Centre uses the term 'Ethics' in a quite a narrow, technical sense to mean 'the process of moral reasoning'. The person-in-the-street meaning of the word suggests a more developed system or ideology of morality. From my point of view as a Christian theologian and ethicist, what the SEE course offers is just as likely to prompt religious exploration as it is to shut it down. It could easily be incorporated into a Christian world-view.
6. The longstanding provision for the teaching of SRE in NSW is an indication that the shape that secular education has always taken in our state is very different to that which exists in the USA or in France. Australia has no state church; but the government and religious organisations have a long tradition of friendly co-operation at a number of levels. 'Secular' does not mean 'freedom from religion' in Australia but rather 'freedom of religion'. Nonetheless, SRE providers should regard their access to public schools as a privilege and not a right.
7. SRE was provided in the first instance so that religious communities would not feel compelled to educate their children in a ghetto but alongside children of

other faiths and none. It contributes to the peaceable relations that exist amongst the religious (and the non-religious) in our state.

8. SRE was also provided in order to provide the wider populace with the opportunity for exposure to the religious point of view within the education. One oft-overlooked fact is that many non-religious parents happily send their children to SRE. While some SRE providers see themselves as primarily serving their own (often ethno-religious) communities, Anglican providers of SRE see themselves as offering a choice to the whole community, whether identifying as Anglican or not.
9. As things stand, the legislation hastily introduced by the outgoing Labor government in 2010 in all likelihood secures the future of the provision of SRE as well as introducing the potential for SEE. There is no need for SRE providers to seek to have the SEE provision repealed at the present time.
10. However, there are still ways in which the SRE/SEE 'slot' could be strengthened in the Act. At present, there is no recommended *minimum* time for SRE specified in the Act – only a maximum. A specified minimum of half an hour would help both school principals and SRE providers negotiate the provision of SRE (and indeed SEE) with clarity.
11. As much reassurance should be given to providers of SRE as practically possible that there is no move afoot to obliterate the provision of SRE. At the same time, SRE providers should welcome scrutiny of their programmes –

their syllabuses and the training of their volunteer teachers. There should be equity between SEE and SRE providers as to the level of expected training for teachers.

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