

**Submission  
No 45**

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

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## Submission to the Committee to investigate Ethics Classes

### Points

In Australia, Religion and State are separate. If Fred Nile wants to investigate ethics classes then I have to ask the question, why do public schools need to provide any religious education at all? There are ample religious schools and churches available that provide local opportunities to parents who choose religious instruction, whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu or other.

I would like my child to gain critical thinking skills, to learn about the precepts of various religions and to be able to examine ethical issues. This is what ethics classes facilitate. The key word being facilitate and not teach. Fred Nile's argument that ethics classes are 'imposed values' is completely erroneous. In fact, the reverse is true. While SRE classes do impose a prescribed value system, ethics classes teach children to think about values.

Ethics classes are not available at my own child's primary school. At an absolute minimum, ethics classes should be simultaneously available in every school as an alternative to religious classes. The current alternative of children twiddling their fingers or catching up on homework is completely unacceptable in a public school. The end product will be more children twiddling their fingers if ethics classes are removed altogether. People will not automatically send their child to a religious class if there is no alternative. Australia is made up of multicultural and diverse communities. Getting rid of ethics classes just narrows choices for parents.

I completely agree with parents4ethics who argue, why does this investigation apply only to ethics classes? As they state, SRE classes have never been formally investigated since their introduction in the 19th Century. Recent research indicates that there is a need to investigate SRE classes. If Nile is concerned about the imposition of values, is he aware of the extent to which this is an issue in SRE classes?

Again from Parents4ethics - Catherine Byrne, a PhD scholar at Macquarie University, has conducted surveys of scripture teachers, parents, school teachers, children and principals as part of her research on religion in education. According to some of the quotes from her surveys, children in some SRE classes are being told: "God gets angry at men who marry foreign women", and that people from overseas have "disgusting customs". Catherine Byrne says: Most Christian SRE volunteers in my survey thought that children should be taught the Bible as fact and not given a choice about belief in God. 80 per cent thought children should not be exposed to other religions. One teacher noted that children were threatened with burning in hell if they did not "believe in Jesus." In several schools children were being told that "the earth is 6000 years old" and that "man and dinosaurs once lived together." With no oversight, volunteer instructors can say and do almost whatever they like. In one school, young children were told that "Hindu's are cows" and a retiring teacher recalled that she had heard an SRE volunteer invite a child to "hop up on old Charlie's knee and give him a sloppy kiss."

Although I have not conducted research like Macquarie University, I have certainly heard similar first person accounts to those above from friends and acquaintances. How are SRE volunteers screened and trained to teach at public schools?

If you are going to investigate and evaluate ethics classes, then SRE classes must also be investigated and evaluated. Not to do so would be negligent, irresponsible and discriminatory. It would also be dubious.

If the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 were repealed, there would no longer be a legal requirement to offer ethics classes as an option for children not attending SRE classes. This move could return us to a situation in which children opting out of SRE are given nothing meaningful to do. This is entirely unacceptable for thousands of parents, children and other members of the NSW community. Ethics and SRE classes should be available unilaterally. Parents should be given a choice.

Australia is a country where Religion and State should be separate. This is a prime opportunity to make sure that this cherished principle is implemented. I do not want to see Australia adopt a United States style of policy making where religious groups use political tactics to impose their particular viewpoint and way of life on everyone else.

## **Recommendations**

- Ethics classes should be available to an equal extent as SRE classes. Parents should be given an opportunity to make their own choice for their children.
- Ethic classes should be on at the same time as SRE classes. Children who do not do scripture should not have to sit and do nothing or catch up on homework.
- Religious education is based on a prescribed value system. If Ethic classes are to be investigated for imposing values, then SRE classes must also be investigated. To do otherwise would be dubious.
- Australia is a diverse and multicultural country. Our public schools should reflect community diversity. Besides ethic classes, SRE classes should be inclusive of all the other religions practiced in NSW.
- State and Religion should be separate. If public schools provide SRE classes, then public schools should provide ethics classes.