

# Submission to the NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011

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*by the Rationalist Society of Australia Inc.*

The Rationalist Society of Australia Inc. (RSA) has followed with interest the trial and introduction of Ethics Education (EE) as a complement to Special Religious Education (SRE) in NSW government schools.

The Rationalist Society agrees with the principle of freedom of religion but this freedom must be accompanied by the principle of freedom *from* religion for those who desire it. The introduction of EE has now given parents a genuine choice: SRE or EE or neither of these.

However, for different reasons which we elaborate below, we do not think this is satisfactory. We think both SRE and EE should be removed and replaced with a world-class education in a range of 'world views' including religious worldviews and worldviews based on secular moral philosophy.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians states that all Australian schools must 'ensure that schooling contributes to a socially cohesive society that respects and appreciates cultural, social and religious diversity' so that 'all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens'.

We think an educational environment in which students learn *together* about a range of worldviews is more likely to meet the Goal of contributing to a socially cohesive society than an environment in which students are *separated* into different groups based on the religious (or non-religious) beliefs of their parents.

Learning together about a range of worldviews, coming to understand what they have in common and where they differ, is more likely to develop the skills and capacities needed to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens.

## **Teaching Ethics in Principle**

The RSA supports the teaching of ethics in all schools, government schools as well as independent and Catholic schools. We note that the teaching of values is already part of the NSW curriculum<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentssupport/studentwellbeing/values/index.php>

which lists the following core values: integrity, excellence, respect, responsibility, cooperation, participation, care, fairness and democracy.

Nevertheless, we accept that there should be more emphasis, more time and more resources devoted to teaching not only substantive morality (ie, what is good and bad, right and wrong, fair and not fair) but also ethical process (ie, how to reason about what is good and bad, right and wrong, fair and not fair; how to arrive at substantive moral judgements and how to explain those judgements).

The key question is whether this should be done as part of the core curriculum, or separately under different conditions. We think teaching moral codes of behaviour and ethical reasoning are too important to be left to volunteers, no matter how well meaning, and ought to be part of the core curriculum, taught by professionally trained teachers.

### **Ethics Education and Special Religious Education in Practice**

In NSW, government policy used to *prohibit* the teaching of ‘alternative lessons ... within the curriculum or in other areas such as ethics ...’. There seems little doubt that this *strong* prohibition contributed to the uprising of parental concern that led to the EE trial, which subsequently enjoyed strong public support.

However, we believe the system of syllabus development for SRE and syllabus delivery for both SRE and EE is flawed. In the case of SRE, syllabus development currently has insufficient checks and balances, compared with any other aspect of the school curriculum, to assure the public that appropriate content is being taught. In both cases, syllabus delivery is unprofessional and unreliable.

### **Syllabus Development**

Both SRE and EE use syllabuses that are approved by certain authorities. In the case of SRE, the syllabus is approved by religious bodies that are approved by the Minister for Education. However it is unclear what pedagogies underpin SRE syllabuses and whether the content is developed by qualified educational professionals. The Department of Education appears to have no role in approving the end result.

In the case of EE, the syllabus has been developed by professional qualified educators engaged by the St James Ethics Centre. The syllabus is based on an approach that uses a well-established educational method of Socratic dialogue to arrive at a set of moral norms that form the basis of a pluralistic democratic society – respect, compassion, honesty, reciprocity – norms shared by most religious traditions. The Department of Education participated in the development of this syllabus.

We think any curriculum that addresses such an important and sensitive area should be developed by qualified and experienced educational professionals, accountable to the NSW Department of Education.

## Syllabus Delivery

When it comes to delivery of the syllabus, both SRE and EE rely on volunteers. RSA believes this model carries too much risk to be acceptable in what is a sensitive and important area of child development. SRE and EE are different, in this regard, from other areas that might enjoy volunteer assistance, such as music or sport. SRE and EE address the foundations of a child's worldview, the values they adopt and the subsequent evaluations they make based on those values. This is not the case with music or sport.

There are two concerns about using volunteers.

The first is that using volunteers in such a sensitive and important area makes it difficult to know just what is going on during the class; there may be a syllabus but student questions may diverge into other areas. The ability to manage classroom discussions effectively requires considerable experience and training. Volunteers may not have the skills to bring the discussion back to the agreed syllabus, instead allowing their own personal views and values to shape the discussion. Moreover, discussions about values and morals are often complex (ie, involving multiple variables and multiple frames of reference). Faced with complex questions, there is a danger that volunteers, inadequately trained or intellectually unequipped to deal with complexity, might fall back on simplistic answers that undermine the very democratic values that Australians generally would wish to inculcate in students: values like tolerance, respect and fairness.

The second concern is about the reliability of volunteer provision. While the Christian churches have a strong institutional framework from which they can draw volunteers, this is not the case for other religions that might wish to offer SRE, and it is not the case for the provision of EE volunteers. Thus there is an imbalance of institutional support, which means in effect that Christian churches dominate the provision of SRE. And while the recruitment of volunteers for EE is in the early stages, we think that without the same institutional foundation, the provision of EE volunteers may be unsustainable. This is clearly an issue of equity.

We think the risk of exposure to inappropriate content associated with the use of volunteers is unacceptable. Teaching about morality and ethical reasoning should be part of the core curriculum and taught by professionally trained teachers.

## Effects of Separation

The present system of offering parents a choice to opt their child into SRE or EE or neither segregates children according to the religious (or non-religious) beliefs of their parents. The RSA is aware of many parents who testify to the detrimental effects of such segregation, particularly in the early years of primary school when students want to be with their friends. For example, a Jewish parent said the following:

*My son was beginning to feel excluded ... He started asking a lot of questions: "Why do I have to go outside the class? Why am I different?" ... To me, this is a clear case of school sanctioned exclusion. I could understand Christian only teaching if we went to a private Christian school. However, my son attends a local PUBLIC school. There is no cross above the door or in their emblem. How can children*

*be excluded out of the curriculum like this at so early an age? What is this teaching my son and his fellow students?*<sup>2</sup>

Another parent said *"This is a multifaith school, and we do not want to divide our children on the basis of religion."*<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the present system adds complexity to the job of principals trying to accommodate the various wishes of parents. In an increasingly diverse society with increasingly diverse religious persuasions, parents will demand different types of SRE. And now there is EE. And for some who want neither, principals must still provide appropriate other activities. In all cases, there is a requirement for appropriate supervision by qualified teachers.

The RSA would argue it is undesirable to separate children (particularly young children) on the basis of something they do not fully understand, and unnecessary to add to the logistical burden of principals. The solution is to remove both SRE and EE and replace both with professional core curriculum in the range of worldviews most Australians subscribe to or experience.

#### **Auditing if SRE and EE are retained**

Because both SRE and EE syllabus development is not properly accountable and because syllabus delivery relies on volunteers, we think neither SRE nor EE should continue in their present forms.

However, if SRE and EE are retained, RSA would recommend there be a system of auditing to give the public some assurance that volunteers are not deviating too far from the syllabus, and not imposing their own worldviews.

The usual way authorities are assured that what is going on is what *ought* to be going on is to conduct audits. Under an audit system, *ad hoc* checks are done to sample what is happening in practice and to assess the degree to which practice matches policy.

But, as Thomas Hobbes said<sup>4</sup>, '... covenants, without the sword, are but words and of no strength ... at all' and auditing, without the power of enforcement, is of no use at all. Therefore, there would also need to be appropriate sanctions should volunteers be found to be doing the wrong thing.

However, while the general public should be able to be assured that children are not being exposed to views and values that undermine social cohesion, auditing and enforcement would be awkward and costly to establish.

RSA therefore thinks it would be better to avoid having to set up such a system in the first place by simply dispensing with volunteer-operated SRE and EE.

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<sup>2</sup> Submission to the Human Rights Commission Inquiry on Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

<sup>3</sup> "Christian Classes mandatory at multi-faith Primary Schools", Herald Sun, 8 March 2012

<sup>4</sup> Hobbes, T. *The Leviathan*

## Conclusion

If citizens in NSW were asked which of the following options they would prefer, we think the response would be overwhelmingly for Option 2:

1. Separating children into different religious persuasions (Christians in one room, Jews in another, Muslims in another, and everybody else in the corridor), for instruction by volunteers trained over a few hours by a religious organisation
2. Children learning together about various world views, their history and contributions to society, under the guidance of a teacher qualified by years of professional education and training.

The provision of SRE is unaccountable, unprofessional and exposes children to unacceptable risks because of the way the system is designed. The provision of EE, while professionally designed, currently relies on volunteers and therefore also carries risks.

It's time all Australian States and Territories replaced this outdated system with one that supports a world-class education in various world-views, religious and not-religious, developed by educational professionals and delivered by professional, qualified teachers.

Rationalist Society of Australia

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