

THE SCHOOL SCRIPTURE VS ETHICS DEBATE

BACKGROUND TO THE DEBATE

On November 25, 2009, the former NSW Premier Nathan Rees made an unprecedented intervention to waive Department of Education and Training policy and introduce a 10 week trial of Ethics classes as an alternative to Special Religious Education (often called “Scripture” classes). This trial is being conducted in 10 State schools, in response to a submission by the St James Ethics Centre and the NSW Federation of P&C Associations. When the trial concludes at the end of term 2 the Premier, Minister of Education, and Department of Education and Training will decide whether or not to expand these classes to encompass all school years and all schools in NSW.

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

The Ethics trial has been promoted as a way of giving children who don’t attend SRE something meaningful to do during that time. At present, children not in SRE are supposed to be supervised by school teachers while reading or doing other quiet, private study.

However, Ethics classes will unavoidably draw some students away from SRE. In the trial schools, for example, 47% of students enrolled in Protestant or Anglican SRE have transferred to Ethics.¹ Should the proposal be accepted, SRE enrolments will drop at many schools.

That means this debate can never merely be about caring for children who don’t attend SRE. It is also about the value of religious education in schools. Is SRE of sufficient value that schools do not offer alternate tuition in competition with it? Schools do not woo children away from maths, art or physical education by offering alternate classes at the same time. Will they treat SRE the same way?

HOW CAN WE RESPOND?

The state government and the Department of School Education are interested in the views of members of the public. Atheist and humanist groups are rallying support for the ethics classes. When the trial was first proposed last year, the Christian community and other religious communities were silent. The time has come to speak.

The best way to respond is in writing, expressing your concern about the ethics classes and your support of SRE continuing to be offered at times where there are *no alternative classes run in competition* with it.

WHAT TO INCLUDE IN YOUR LETTER

- State up front that you oppose the introduction of ethics classes in the same time slot as Special Religious Education (SRE)
- Include some reasons for your opposition. (Choose reasons you agree with from the list below.)
 - SRE is valuable and its unique place within school life should be preserved.
 - Religious education encourages children to think about the questions of God, existence and ultimate purpose. It is important for children to be able to wrestle with these questions. Ethics is not an equivalent subject.

¹ http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/news/stories/govt_trial_decimates_sre/

- Putting additional classes in competition with SRE will create a conflict of choice for some parents and children. (The phrase *conflict of choice* comes from the Department of Education and Training *Implementation of Religious Education Policy* – for more see below.)
 - Teaching children values, ethics and critical thinking is valuable. However such instruction is already embedded in the school curriculum and teachers already do an excellent job in providing these things. (You could refer to the Department of Education and Training publication *Values in Public Schools* published in 2004.²)
 - If any additional classes are deemed worthwhile, these should be attended by all students, not just the non-SRE students.
 - Caring for children who do not attend SRE is important, and the existing *Implementation of Religious Education Policy* contains adequate provisions to ensure this takes place (see below).
 - You might want to consider other reasons given in an article by Peter Jensen called *Ten Reasons the Ethics Trial is Not A Good Idea*³
- Include any personal testimony in support of SRE
 - How helpful you found SRE when you were at school
 - Fond memories of scripture teachers you had
 - Your positive experiences teaching SRE

HOW SHOULD YOU WRITE, AND TO WHOM?

- It's better to send hard copies than emails.
- If your email is long, include **headings in bold** that succinctly summarise your points. That way people can get the gist without reading the whole letter.
- If you only want to send one letter, send it to the Premier.⁴
- If possible, send it to all the people below.

1. The Premier

NSW Premier Kristina Keneally
GPO Box 5341, Sydney NSW 2000

2. The Minister for Education

Ms Verity Firth, MP
Level 31 Governor Macquarie Tower
1 Farrer Place, SYDNEY NSW 2000
office@firth.minister.nsw.gov.au

Local Members of Parliament

3. Charlestown

Mr Matthew Morris
PO Box 135, CHARLESTOWN NSW 2290
charlestown@parliament.nsw.gov.au

4. Maitland

Mr Frank Terenzini
PO Box 212, MAITLAND NSW 2320
maitland@parliament.nsw.gov.au

5. Newcastle

Ms Jodi McKay (also Minister for the Hunter)
PO Box 1816, NEWCASTLE NSW 2300
newcastle@parliament.nsw.gov.au

6. Wallsend

Ms Sonia Hornery
PO Box 324, WALLSEND NSW 2287
wallsend@parliament.nsw.gov.au

² Available online:

https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_serv/student_welfare/valu_scool/PD20050131.shtml

³ Available online: <http://www.youthworks.net/index.php?s=&c=24&d=&e=&f=&g=&a=1225&w=7003&r=Y>

⁴ The whole reason there is a trial of ethics classes in the first place is because of a unilateral decision by Premier Nathan Rees late last year. It's been dumped on the current Premier and the Department of Education and Training, and I suspect many in their administrations would not be entirely happy with being handed this hornets' nest. Nevertheless it was an initiative of the (former) Premier, and so the (current) Premier should be the first person we address.

FURTHER INFORMATION: *THE EDUCATION ACT 1990*⁵

- The relevant legislation is the *Education Act 1990 No 8*, sections 30, 32 and 33.
- This is not as specific as the *Implementation of Religious Education Policy*.
- Some parts imply that room is made in the school week for SRE, i.e. that time is specifically set aside for SRE. I have **marked out these parts below**. The *Policy's* requirement that "no formal lessons or scheduled school activities occur during time set aside for SRE" seems a reasonable application of this.
- However, paragraph (4) suggests that SRE can be offered at different times to different religious groups. If a school did this, it would place serious pressure on the "no other lessons during SRE" policy.
- Here's the wording of section 32.

32 Special religious education

(1) In every government school, **time is to be allowed for the religious education** of children of any religious persuasion, but the total number of hours so allowed in a year is not to exceed, for each child, the number of school weeks in the year.

(2) The religious education to be given to children of any religious persuasion is to be given by a member of the clergy or other religious teacher of that persuasion authorised by the religious body to which the member of the clergy or other religious teacher belongs.

(3) The religious education to be given is in every case to be the religious education authorised by the religious body to which the member of the clergy or other religious teacher belongs.

(4) The times at which religious education is to be given to children of a particular religious persuasion are to be fixed by agreement between the principal of the school and the local member of the clergy or other religious teacher of that persuasion.

(5) Children attending a religious education class are to be separated from other children at the school while the class is held.

(6) If the relevant member of the clergy or other religious teacher fails to attend the school at the appointed time, the children are to be appropriately cared for at the school during **the period set aside for religious education**.

FURTHER INFORMATION: *THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION POLICY*⁶

- This is a Department of Education and Training policy (not legislation).
- Here are a couple of the relevant provisions in this policy:
 - Schools are to support SRE by ensuring that no formal lessons or scheduled school activities occur during time set aside for SRE. Such activities may create conflict of choice for some parents and for some students attending SRE. (Section 3.A.3)
 - Schools are to provide appropriate care and supervision at school for students not attending SRE. This may involve students in other activities such as completing homework, reading and private study. These activities should neither compete with SRE nor be alternative lessons in the subjects within the curriculum or other areas, such as, ethics, values, civics or general religious education. When insufficient teachers or accommodation are available, the school's policy on minimal supervision will operate. (Section 3.A.11)

⁵ Available online: <http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/fullhtml/inforce/act+8+1990+FIRST+0+N#pt.6-sec.32>

⁶ Available online:
<http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/religion/assets/pdf/implementation.pdf>