

## **Ethics and SRE (part 2)**

*Social Issues briefing #099, 13/02/2012.*

*This is the second part of our short series on Special Education Ethics (SEE or 'ethics classes'). SEE was first offered in 2011 to students in years 5 and 6 in State schools who had opted out of attending Special Religious Education (SRE or 'scripture classes').*

*In our first briefing, we updated readers on the current state of play at the level of state governance. You can read this briefing [here](#) (or see link under 'Further Reading').*

*In this briefing, we have attempted to distil some of the arguments made for and against ethics classes. This is a complex issue that continues to divide Christians. We think faithful Christians could argue either for or against ethics classes. We hope this briefing orients you to the various arguments.*

*We usually appreciate feedback, but we won't respond to strong opinions offered for or against SEE classes. We would be glad to hear of any errors of fact.*

The trial of ethics classes in 2010 and their subsequent introduction to those students not attending SRE in 2011 was accompanied by a cacophony of voices, some exuberant and relieved, some angry or anxious, others merely confused. Much commentary has continued since then. In this briefing, we'll address the main arguments for and against ethics classes operating in the same timeslot as scripture classes. We'll also take the opportunity to consider briefly the current operational requirements of SRE, and let you know about the opportunity to make a submission into the current inquiry into ethics classes.

The groups of parents supporting ethics classes are often described as 'non-religious parents' while those against ethics classes are grouped as 'faith parents'. It is worth noting that such groupings are not accurate, since some who support ethics classes are 'parents of faith' (and maybe some who don't, aren't). Not all faith groups have the resources to provide scripture as required. This means that many parents of faith who would like to have their child attend scripture do not have their preferred option available. Other parents who have described themselves as religious prefer to instruct their children in religion at home, and have welcomed ethics classes as a beneficial addition to the curriculum.

### **Arguments made against ethics classes operating at the same time as scripture**

Many have been concerned about the introduction of ethics classes in NSW government schools. The arguments made against ethics classes are varied. Current concerns tend to fall into four broad categories, which we discuss below: historic justice or fairness; course content; procedural and operational concerns; and the benefits of SRE.

Let us set aside a different complaint. Some (include an author of this briefing!) disliked the way the ethics course was introduced. Little information was provided about the substance of the course; there was no transparent consultative process first; and there were some anomalies in how the Department of Education handled the matter. However now that the ethics course has been introduced, to restate these concerns looks like sour grapes. Indeed with a public inquiry now in operation (details later in this briefing), we have an opportunity to explain any related concerns.

### **Arguments against #1: the historical justice of giving SRE a special place**

Scripture classes have been operating in Australia for over 120 years as an outcome of a historical agreement for Government to provide schooling once provided by churches. As such, SRE reflects an important element of our heritage. They provide children with an opportunity to learn about the Bible, the historical person of Jesus and the ethic that has underpinned modern Australian society. No serious historian doubts the formative influence that Jesus and Christianity have had on the legal, cultural and political development of Western civilisation. Attending Christian SRE classes particularly helps provide the children of non-religious parents with an understanding of a historically important aspect of Australian culture. Australians live by many pieces of Biblical wisdom, such as 'turn the other cheek' and 'look after your neighbour'. SRE classes help children to realise that some 'life creeds' actually come from Jesus.

## **Arguments against #2: Lack of clarity over what the ethics classes are about**

Many people (particularly Christians and other faith groups) are concerned about the ideology underpinning the course. Every ethical system brings with it suppositions about how the world works and what criteria people use to judge their (and others) actions within it. Framers of the SEE course say that the emphasis is not on providing a particular answer to any question, but rather on helping students to think in an ethical way; but opponents think that asking children to think about these issues in a moral vacuum can be difficult for them.

In its response to the Parliamentary Inquiry on 14 November 2011, the Christian Democratic Party framed its objections as follows:

*‘The push for SEE has been ideologically driven without applying due diligence with regard to the objectives, curriculum and implementation of the course... NSW children in State primary schools are being taught a course that hasn’t had a defined objective, published curriculum or appropriate implementation. It is a course that has been marketed to parents as merely a secular alternative to religious instruction in the teaching of social values and issues. This isn’t the case. The ‘Special Education in Ethics’ is a philosophical course that presents children with complex social situations, asks them what action they would take and why. There are no right and wrong answers... it has ignored concern that a failure to provide stated objectives and outcomes is facilitating moral relativism not instruction. It has ignored modern science with regard to the development of the adolescent brain and the cognitive ability of children to tackle complex social issues, issues that can prove divisive even for adults’.*

## **Arguments against #3: implementation and the rule of law**

There is a cluster of procedural or operational concerns. As we explained in our first briefing, the practical result of s.33A of the *Education Act 1990* is that for children to swap from SRE to SEE, parents must *first formally seek exemption from SRE in writing*. A place in any available ethics classes will *only* be offered once the written application has been confirmed. It is important to note that most schools are doing a great job of implementing ethics classes as required by the legislation. But it appears that some schools are proceeding incorrectly:

- ❖ **Not opting out of SRE first:** There are reports of parents being offered SEE, or of children being accepted into SEE classes, without the school having received any written request to first exempt the children from SRE. (However, while parents should only be offered a place in ethics classes after they have indicated that they wish to withdraw their child from SRE, the implementation guidelines for ethics classes expect that all parents will be notified that ethics classes are available at the school.)
- ❖ **Minimum class numbers:** SEE classes require a minimum of 8 children to go ahead. In some schools, this requirement of a minimum number of children is reportedly leading to some children who attended SRE being swapped into SEE classes without parents first opting out of SRE classes in the required manner. (Some suggest that removing the minimum requirement will better protect SRE classes from erosion.)
- ❖ **Greater promotion of SEE classes:** Examples include emails or newsletters being sent out to all parents giving details about the new ethics classes, and advertising for SEE volunteer teachers in the weekly newsletters. (However, Principals are required to assist SEE coordinators and teachers as necessary, and to inform all parents of children in the relevant year groups when ethics classes are available. Criticising Principals for supporting ethics classes ‘too strongly’ is a tricky business!)

To be fair, some operational issues may be teething problems that subside as ethics classes become more settled.

## **Arguments against #4: SRE children should be able to attend SEE as well**

This concern approaches SEE from a fundamentally different angle. Essentially it argues that if SEE classes are beneficial for children (as the St James Ethics Centre and the NSW government believes they are), then **all** children should have the opportunity to attend them. Parents should not be forced to choose between two good options run at the same time. Two counter arguments are generally put forward to this claim. Firstly, if SEE classes were

removed from the SRE timeslot and taught in the general curriculum, the original problem of children not being adequately cared for during the SRE timeslot would still exist. Secondly, Dr Simon Longstaff of the St James Ethics Centre argues that SEE was developed as the natural complement to the elements of SRE that discuss ethics and moral decision making. (SRE Providers reply that Christian SRE does not deal with ethics but the person of Jesus Christ, and argue that the true complement to SRE is GRE, or General Religious Education.)

To summarise: key complaints pertain to the bypassing of an historical agreement and partnership between church and government, with loss of possible SRE benefits to some children; the worldview adopted by the SEE course; operational marginalisation of SRE; and loss of possible SEE benefits to some children.

There are other arguments against SEE that should only be used with caution. Some claim that ethics classes teachers aren't adequately trained; or that SEE syllabi are without proper transparency and oversight; or that the ethics classes should be subject to further government review. But each claim could be equally levelled at SRE provision.

### **Arguments made for ethics classes for non-SRE children**

The movement for ethics classes officially started a decade ago, when a group of parents at a NSW public school approached Dr Simon Longstaff, the Director of the St James Ethics Centre to create a secular ethics course for the non-scripture children at their school. In 2003, after a survey of the Federation of P&C Associations in NSW, broad support was shown across NSW for some form of ethics course to be provided as an alternative to scripture classes in NSW. Finally, a trial was run in 10 schools in 2010, concluding with the course being introduced in 2011 to year 5 and 6 students. Throughout this time, parents have claimed that it is unfair that children not attending scripture classes have no meaningful alternative. They argue that all children should be taught useful lessons during all available school hours. Other arguments made question why anyone other than the children and parents involved should be included in the decision around what non-Scripture children should be doing during this time. Still others have decided that whilst they were originally opposed to ethics classes, it would be more harmful for children now to remove them, and they should continue to avoid disruption. In detail:

### **Arguments for #1: the procedural justice of treating all kids similarly**

Under the old rules, students were unable to take part in any activity that competed with SRE, and were expected to be involved in completing homework, reading and private study. The key argument, presented by almost all in favour of ethics classes, is that it is not enough for children to simply be 'supervised' or instructed to do their homework while other students are being taught SRE. Parents who have chosen to withdraw their child from SRE argue that an alternative beneficial option should be available to their children. A child spending time reading in the library may be worthwhile. But there are accounts of children being 'supervised' by watching the same video each week for a term, and unconfirmed reports of children being sent out to collect rubbish during this time. (The DET guidelines for employing children not attending SRE are currently being revised, and will be available on the DEC Curriculum Support website soon.)

### **Arguments for #2: the freedom of non-SRE children's parents to choose**

Proponents of ethics classes express confusion about why opponents care what children do, once these children have been withdrawn from scripture classes. Vocal attempts to stop ethics classes seem to 'interfere' with what their children do during the SRE timeslot. This argument essentially says, 'if you don't like SEE, don't do it, but don't tell my kids not to do it'. These arguments resort to rights language. Do churches that have a 'right' to provide SRE, or do parents have the 'right' to choose? This kind of rights language is generally unhelpful, focusing us on ranking rights. Rather, we can respect the historic reasons for SRE, and also try to cater to those who object to it.

### **Arguments for #3: a change of mind**

Some Christians and others who originally opposed the introduction of ethics classes have now acknowledged that they are less concerned than previously, and are content to allow the current status quo to continue. Initial figures suggest that has SEE classes have not

significantly affected SRE class numbers. It would be more disruptive for children to cancel the ethics classes now than for them to continue.

### **An inquiry into the *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011***

An inquiry was established in November 2011 to report on the *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011*. The terms of reference of the inquiry ask the Committee to inquire into and report on the “stated objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness and other related matters pertaining to the current operation of ‘special education in ethics’ being conducted in State schools, and whether the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed”. The submissions and the oral evidence may take the inquiry beyond these terms.

Submissions must be made by **24 February**. Anyone is welcome to make a submission, which can be submitted online or sent to:

The Director  
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2  
Parliament House  
Macquarie St  
Sydney NSW 2000

### **Further thoughts**

Rightly or wrongly, modern schooling goes well beyond ‘reading, writing and arithmetic’. Education in Australia has always provided a platform for children to be exposed to a suite of issues that develop the whole person. In our schools, we teach children about physical exercise, society and culture. We encourage children to learn to act, play music and debate. We teach them to draw, create, and to make speeches. Some may remember ‘Healthy Harold’, the giraffe who visits schools as part of *Life Education Australia*, to help children make good choices for a healthy life. Teaching children about religion remains an important facet of the broad education we value for children in NSW. Christians who disagree with SEE can, perhaps, extend the same latitude to it.

Rather than being fearful of the challenges being presented by ethics classes, Christians can embrace the opportunity to provide **well-trained teachers** to clearly explain the message of the gospel to children. SRE in NSW is a fantastic opportunity and privilege for churches, and plays an important part in helping us share the knowledge of Jesus. It’s important to do it very well.

Over recent years, the Sydney Diocese has taken considerable action to raise the qualifications of SRE teachers – a courageous move not without some criticism by those who feared that higher training requirements might reduce the number of willing and able teachers. Those authorised to deliver SRE on behalf of the Diocese are all required to undertake Safe Ministry Training every three years, as well as undertaking the [Christian Education Accreditation](#) provided by Anglican Youthworks. This is a 2 day training course. Zac Veron, the CEO of Youthworks, commends the course, saying that “SRE accreditation will help protect SRE by ensuring that every teacher authorised by the Anglican Church to teach is fully equipped for week-to-week ministry with young people ... making the most of the wonderful opportunity to invest in the state of our children’s spiritual future”. Anglican Youthworks estimates that almost 60% of teachers have already done the accreditation (over 2000 teachers across the Sydney Diocese).

Finally, as the discussion continues, we must continue to speak out of love and concern for the good of others, remembering that we have the words of eternal life to share. Let us also continue to provide high quality SRE lessons that clearly make Jesus’ call to follow him.

*Thank you for taking the time to read this long briefing. We hope it has been helpful for you in clarifying your thoughts on SRE and SEE classes in NSW. **Can we exhort you to pray, asking God to uphold the place, and quality, of scripture in NSW schools?***

- **Rebecca Belzer and Andrew Cameron**  
*for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

**Sources/Further Reading:**

Ethics classes and SRE (Part 1) – *Social Issues briefing #098*

[http://www.sie.org.au/briefings/ethics\\_classes\\_and\\_sre\\_part\\_1](http://www.sie.org.au/briefings/ethics_classes_and_sre_part_1)

Guidelines for principals around SEE by the Department of Education,

<http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/ethics/index.htm>

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

<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/committee.nsf/0/3312B8C2F2E89AD2CA257948000E930>

Christian Education Accreditation – Anglican Youthworks, <http://www.youthworks.net/sre>

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