

Ethics-based Complement to Scripture Pilot Approved

On 25 November 2009, St James Ethics Centre welcomed the announcement by Premier Nathan Rees, approving its proposal to conduct a pilot program for an ethics-based complement to scripture in 10 NSW primary schools.

"Parents have said they want their children to be fully engaged when they are at school," Mr Rees told the Sydney Morning Herald. "The current system, however, does not allow for educational classes for children who do not participate in scripture."

"This is not about ending religious education in our schools, it's about providing a choice," Mr Rees said.

Project update

The 10-week trial at 10 NSW Primary schools will commence in Term 2, 2010 and will run during the regular Scripture/SRE period for Years 5 and 6 students only. All students at the pilot schools in Years 5 and 6 have been invited to attend. Enrolments close on February 24.

St James Ethics Centre on behalf of the Federation of NSW P and C Associations is conducting the Ethics Pilot. The Department of Education and Training (DET) is overseeing the proper conduct of the trial. An independent assessor who is yet to be appointed will

evaluate the course itself, as well as the operational arrangements supporting it. Students, parents, ethics 'teachers' and school principals will be asked to respond to questionnaires as a part of the pilot project.

St James Ethics Centre is paying all costs of running the pilot from donated funds, however DET is paying for the assessment to ensure there is no conflict of interest in the evaluation.

The 10 schools that self-nominated to participate in the trial are Darlinghurst, Bungendore, Neutral Bay, Rozelle, Hurstville, Ferncourt, Baulkham Hills North, Leichhardt, Randwick and Crown Street Public Schools.

Despite approaches by many other schools in NSW, we are limiting the number of schools in the trial to 10. This will ensure the trial is large enough to give valuable information across a wide variety of schools and small enough to be manageable.

Support from any interested school is warmly welcomed and can be registered on St James Ethics Centre website www.specialethicseducation.com.au. You will also find a list of frequently asked questions on this site, along with ongoing project updates.

Curriculum

Professor Phillip Cam from the University of New South Wales, an international expert in philosophical inquiry for children, has written the pilot curriculum. Ethics 'teachers' will be recruited from within each school community and trained in a two-day session late this term.

The course content is currently being examined by the Board of Studies, so although it is not yet confirmed, below is the current course outline that we expect to deliver.

Session 1: "Getting Started"

The first session will be used to set up the class. It will involve discussion of moral dilemmas that can be used to help students to begin to get used to the discussion rules and the use of the Speaker's Ball.

Session 2: "Fairness"

In this session students will be given the opportunity to think about some of the reasons why things can be said to be either fair or not fair, by being asked to judge whether a given scenario is fair or not fair. The concept of fairness is central to what we generally think of as proper dealing with one another, but it is of particular concern to children, who are often subject to the dictates of adults. Fairness applies to distribution as well as to retribution, and it is connected to a wide array of moral and social concerns such as impartiality, equality, rights, obligations and desert.

Session 3: “Lying”

In the previous session students were asked to make absolute or categorical judgments as to whether something was either fair or not fair. In this session they are asked to make relative judgments. They will be dealing with a range of cases in which people have told a lie and they are asked to judge to what extent that is acceptable as well as to figure out why one lie is either more acceptable or less acceptable than another. In discussing and exploring their disagreements, the students will be drawn into giving and evaluating reasons for their judgments. The aim is to carefully consider the reasons for making one or another judgment, rather than necessarily for everyone to end up in agreement.

Session 4: “Ethical Principles”

In this session students are asked to think about principles of ethical decision-making. They will be familiar with principles such as “You should always tell the truth” and “You should keep your promises.” The session is designed to draw attention to such principles and their possible limitations, as well as tensions that can exist between them.

Session 5: “Graffiti”

This lesson deals with the topic of graffiti. Students are asked to discuss various examples of graffiti and to suggest possible measures that may help to reduce the incidence of graffiti in their local area.

Session 6: “The Use and Abuse of Animals”

This session returns to relative judgment. It asks students to think about various ways in which we treat animals and to examine the acceptability of

one case by comparison with another. Students are also asked to search for principles—the topic of Session 4—to which they may appeal to justify their decisions. The focus on a search for principles to support relative judgment should help to consolidate the earlier work.

Session 7: “Interfering with Nature”

We often think that what is natural is what is meant to be, and that it is dangerous or even immoral to interfere with nature. In this session, students are asked to decide whether various things people do are acceptable or not acceptable interventions in nature and to develop criteria for making ethical distinctions between different cases.

Session 8: “Virtues and Vices”

In this session the class will be exploring the topic of virtues and vices, in the sense of good and bad character traits. They will be asked to consider whether virtues and vices always correspond to one another, as well as to discuss the extent to which the virtues are related to one another, and similarly with vices.

Session 9: “Children’s Rights”

This lesson asks the students to consider whether certain rights should or should not be accorded to them.

Session 10: “The Good Life”

In the final session students will be given the opportunity to talk about what they need in order to have a good life. The session will allow students to apply the understandings that they have developed during the term to this central topic in ethics.

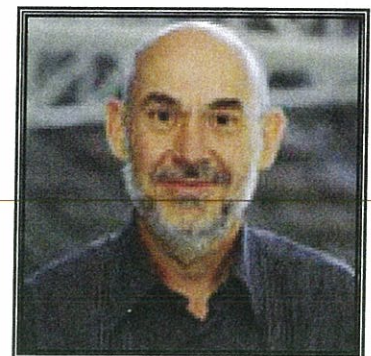
The Future

Once the Ethics Pilot is completed in Term 2, submissions will be made to the Minister recommending the future direction of teaching ethics as a complement to scripture in NSW. Timing of the decision will be up to Minister Firth, but we will hope for a quick and positive reply.

Thanks to all the parents of NSW who supported the public campaign to get the trial approved by the Minister. We look forward to your ongoing support as the pilot progresses and a permanent change of policy is sought.

For more information, please see www.specialethicseducation.com.au. We will update our website as developments occur.

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Professor Phillip Cam
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