

Ethics Pilot Under Attack

Despite a misinformation and scaremongering campaign led by Anglican Archbishop Peter Jensen of the Sydney Diocese, the hopes of a large group of parents of children in NSW public primary schools remain intact, with the Ethics Pilot getting underway in ten schools in Week 1.

The pilot program is being run in nine Sydney schools and one regional school. They are Darlinghurst, Bungendore, Rozelle, Hurstville, Haberfield, Ferncourt (Marrickville), Baulkham Hills North, Leichhardt, Randwick and Crown Street Public Schools. These schools all self-nominated last year after the Annual Conference of the NSW Federation of P&C Associations overwhelmingly passed a motion to join with St James Ethics Centre to approach the minister to trial a program that would provide a meaningful alternative to children who opt out of SRE (Special Religious Education).

Archbishop Jensen penned the article, Ten Reasons Why the Ethics Trial is Not a Good Idea, in the April edition of Southern Cross, a magazine published by the Sydney Anglicans. This was most disappointing, as during the consultation process, we spoke to a cross section of faith groups, several of whom (Uniting Church, Islamic Council and Hindu Council) strongly endorse the program. It is regrettable that Archbishop Jensen refused to meet with us at that time. It may well have allayed his concerns.

A lot was published and broadcast in the fortnight before the pilot began – much of it both deliberately



misleading and fear mongering. It resulted in the Australian Christian Lobby setting up its own campaign site to oppose the ethics pilot. In the interests of accuracy and to try to dispel this unnecessary fear among people of faith everywhere, here are the facts.

Myth 1: We are trying to get rid of scripture (SRE) in schools.

Fact: Neither the Federation of P&C Associations nor St James Ethics Centre has the desire or intention to eliminate SRE from schools. SRE is guaranteed to remain, as it is enshrined in the NSW Education Act. What we are seeking to do is to have the minister change the DET policy that prevents children who opt out of SRE from doing anything meaningful during that time.

Myth 2: St James Ethics Centre (SJEC) has acted unethically while conducting the trial because it is trying to draw students away from SRE.

Fact: The P&C and SJEC have

worked closely with the DET in the course of this trial. We acted on DET advice to inform all parents of Years 5&6 children at the pilot schools about the options available for opt out children in Term 2. DET stands by its decision to inform all parents, rather than just those whose children opted out in Term 1. Schools notify all parents when any new SRE options are offered as well.

Myth 3: This is an argument between the religions and the secular world.

Fact: Although Archbishop Peter Jensen has tried to position his argument as religions vs. the rest, this is not the case. Parents of no faith and strong religious faith support this trial. Several of the faith groups either endorse or are ambivalent about the provision of ethics classes for children who opt out of SRE.

Myth 4: SRE kids will now be disadvantaged if ethics classes are offered during SRE time.

Fact: As a mark of good faith,

SJEC and the P&C have said that if an ongoing program is approved, then all of the material that is developed for that program will be given to faith groups for use 'as is' or adaptation to suit their purposes. A recent tactic of our opponents seems to be that the ethics course should be included into the curriculum. However, this will not solve the problem of the injustice perpetrated on children who opt out of SRE who are not allowed to undertake meaningful activity at this time.

Myth 5: The government is funding the ethics program and it doesn't fund SRE.

Fact: The pilot is being funded by private individual donations to SJEC. Two of the main donors are, in fact, committed Christians who believe in this project. Training of the 33 volunteer ethics teachers (who are also not being paid) was held in the P&C Federation's training room in Granville, Sydney.

Myth 6: Parents don't know whose ethics are being taught, so they should be careful about sending kids to these classes.

Fact: Ethics is best understood as a process of enquiry into the question, "What ought one to do?" It does then lead to questions of what is 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong'. Ethics classes are intended to encourage and support the exploration of the ethical dimension of life – and to allow room for a range of perspectives to be encountered. Teachers don't provide a point of view. They just facilitate discussion between the children.

Myth 7: You don't know who these ethics teachers are.

Fact: Yes you do! Most of the 33 people trained as ethics teachers are parents at each school. A few are teachers. There

are some community members who volunteered as well. All have undergone full police checks, which are not required by many of the SRE providers, although some do it nonetheless.

Myth 8: The Minister for Education and the Premier aren't really in favour of this pilot. Ex-Premier, Nathan Rees, forced it on them.

Fact: At a press conference held at Haberfield Public School on the first day of the pilot, the minister expressed strong support for this ethics trial. She is excited that there is now a choice for parents of children who opt out of SRE in these schools. She was even more enthusiastic after participating in the first class!

Myth 9: This is an atheist plot against religions.

Fact: Although this pilot has received support from the Atheist Foundation of Australia, it has also received support from the Dalai Lama, the Uniting Church, the Islamic Council, the Hindu Council and Fr Brian Lucas, General Secretary of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The P&C has taken this issue to the government in response to years of complaints by a growing number of parents who opt their children out of SRE for varying reasons.

Myth 10: Kids will be forced to do ethics classes if they opt out of SRE.

Fact: No they won't. It will be an option available to all children who opt out of SRE, but the current supervised period of meaningless activity will be available to those who don't wish to participate.

Where to From Here?

The trial will run for ten weeks during Term 2 and will be evaluated by an independent academic contracted by the DET.

Once the report is presented to the Minister, it will be made public. No doubt there will be another wave of lobbying by some churches to prevent the minister from changing the policy, as well as another joint submission by the P&C and SJEC seek approval to roll out ethics classes for K-6 in all 1300 primary schools in NSW. This will be a mammoth task and would occur in stages over time.

In the meantime, we ask that people debating this topic do so in an informed and rational manner. You may find the answers to many of your questions at the website especially dedicated to this issue – <http://www.specialethicseducation.com.au> (click on FAQ at the bottom of the page).

As a show of support, we also ask that parents discuss the following motion at individual P&C meetings in Term 2. "That the NSW Minister for Education changes DET policy to allow secular ethics classes to operate as a complement to scripture/SRE classes in NSW primary schools."

If the motion is carried, please send a letter on your P&C letterhead signed by the P&C President noting that the motion carried and the date of the meeting. Please email to trussell@aapt.net.au or post to
Attn: Ethics Pilot Project Coordinator
St James Ethics Centre
GPO Box 3599
Sydney NSW 2001

To keep up to date with this issue, please join the facebook page, *Towards an Ethics Based Complement to Scripture in NSW*.

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