

# NSW ethics classes earn religions' endorsement

*Teresa Russell*

**P**Primary School children in New South Wales who don't attend scripture classes now have the legal right to attend philosophical ethics classes at that time, if there are sufficient numbers of students and a trained volunteer to take the class.

That right has been hard-fought by tens of thousands of parents over decades and has just recently come under threat, as Rev Fred Nile, a right wing Christian Democrat in NSW's upper house, tries to use Ethics classes as a bargaining chip to pass IR legislation very important to the O'Farrell government. At the time of writing, the NSW government was refusing to cave in to Rev Nile's demands.

## History

Provision of religion in NSW primary schools is based on an agreement between the church and state dating back to the mid- to late-nineteenth century. When the state of NSW took over public education (from the Anglican and Catholic churches) to ensure education for all children, it agreed to reserve an hour a week for special religious education (SRE). Undoubtedly, a majority of parents would have approved of this at the time. In 1901 census figures revealed only 0.4% of the Australian population identified themselves as having no religion. At the last census (2006), however, that number had grown to 18.7%.

While the number of students who do not attend scripture is not officially recorded, anecdotal reports suggest as many as 25% (or around 100,000) children enrolled in NSW primary schools "opt out" for that period every week. On average, in any school across NSW last year, 5–60% of children were being supervised while faith groups taught SRE. The children who opted out were either from families of a faith other than the ones teaching religion at their school, or of no faith.

NSW Department of Education policy required "non-scripture" students to undertake private study such as completing homework or reading, however children were often watching DVDs or sitting in a corridor outside the principal's office and in one school, reportedly collecting rubbish. These activities were to "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."



In 1980, the Rawlinson Committee, set up to review special religious education in schools, specifically recommended that pupils withdrawn from SRE should be provided with purposeful secular learning (Rec 62). This recommendation was not implemented after lobbying by faith groups who felt it would be wrong to introduce what they saw as competition during that period.

The issue simmered for the next few decades until a group of parents at a lower north shore public school approached Dr Simon Longstaff, Executive Director of St James Ethics Centre (SJEC), asking him to create a secular ethics course for the non-scripture children at their school. After having his request to the government denied on the grounds that this was not broadly required across the state, Dr Longstaff met with the Federation of P&C Associations in NSW in 2003, which then surveyed its members, confirming that the government's conclusions were incorrect. Despite this evidence and in the face of another

strong push from mainstream churches, the government denied the request again.

In September 2009, after 18 months of community consultation, Verity Firth, NSW Minister for Education, received a joint submission from the P&C Federation and SJEC to run a pilot program in just 10 schools. The pilot was written by Prof Phillip Cam of the University of NSW who had spent his career focused on the teaching of philosophy to children.

Despite loud opposition from a few faith groups and the Rev Fred Nile who saw this option as an attempt to remove scripture from schools, and especially because of the overwhelming public support for the initiative, the government gave the program the go-ahead after a successful pilot and independent evaluation.

When the then NSW Opposition said it would cancel the classes when it took power, Labour, The Greens and a few Independents combined to pass an amendment to the

# Over 60%\* of independent schools in NSW and half of Australia's universities use Sophos to protect their computers, email and web usage. **Do you?**

*"After considering several options, we chose Sophos because they are making a huge investment in schools. Education is not just an added extra for Sophos but they are putting the time, skills and resources into understanding the ins and outs of security in this sector."*

**Mike Israel, IT Manager at Knox Grammar School**

*"Since implementing Sophos, we were able to refocus our efforts and provide ongoing, proactive support in the classroom. Our Service Desk staff is now able to get into the classrooms and assist teachers and students with their learning tasks."*

**Steven Archibald, ICT Manager at Carey Baptist Grammar School**

*"Sophos is a leader in providing complete security and control in the corporate sector and they can be trusted to do the same for the education industry."*

**Graeme Wallace, IT Manager at St Catherine's School**

Contact the Sophos Education team on 02 9409 9100 or try Sophos for yourself. Visit [www.sophos.com/products](http://www.sophos.com/products)



## SOPHOS

\* Schools with more than 250 computers

Education Act creating a legal right for children who don't attend SRE/scripture classes to attend classes in philosophical ethics where they are offered. In early February, the Opposition joined the majority of NSW citizens in supporting the introduction of Ethics classes and they subsequently were swept to power in March.

Although SJEC was named the initial approved provider of classes in philosophical ethics, Primary Ethics a new, independent, not-for-profit organisation established by SJEC for this purpose, is responsible for all aspects of course delivery, including providing trained volunteers and resources.

The recent furore played out on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald in mid-July seemed to have handed the Ethics classes an uncertain future, as Rev Nile tried to hold the government to ransom. The backlash from parents and the general public was unsurprising. The Anglican and Catholic churches, previously opponents of Ethics classes, swung their support behind them.

'The leading opponent to the introduction of ethics classes in NSW schools, the Anglican Church, has reversed its position and says they should be retained, while the Catholic Church now argues they should not be removed as they have "little impact" on the teaching of scripture.' (SMH 21 July, 2011)

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/nile-isolated-as-anglicans-back-ethics-classes-20110720-1hp05.html#ixzz1TGSCIAP3>.

At the time of writing, this issue remains unresolved, with the government refusing to bend to Nile's demands.

## Volunteer ethics teachers

Primary Ethics ran its inaugural training workshops for 90 volunteer ethics teachers at the beginning of February this year and is now operating 180 Ethics classes each week at 126 schools across the state, reaching about 2700 children. There are more than 1600 primary schools in NSW, although half are very small rural schools.

'The quality of the volunteers selected for this first round of training was outstanding,' says Bruce Hogan, Chariman of Primary Ethics. He acknowledges that the fledgling organisation has capacity constraints when it comes to meeting the full demand for programs in schools across the State. 'Primary Ethics is a charitable enterprise that is only able to operate because of the extraordinary good will of many. This is a social enterprise operating without capital or any assured income. Volunteers and the spirit that motivates them for the good of children are our only assets.'

Primary Ethics stresses that recruitment and training of the right people to organise and teach Ethics classes is crucial. Trained volunteer ethics teachers range in age from 22-75 and more than 25% are men, predominantly fathers. Most of the volunteers are highly educated and all are highly motivated to make the program

## Primary Ethics is looking for volunteers all over NSW so it can deliver ethics education to all those children who want it

succeed. Some are doing it for their children, to ensure that the program gets firmly established, while others are themselves refugees from non-scripture periods.

Training currently takes the form of two face-to-face days (followed and preceded by online learning) led by a philosopher and a trained adult educator – both of whom are also volunteers. All ethics teachers are carefully selected and undertake child protection training as well as a police check.

Primary Ethics is looking for volunteers all over NSW so it can deliver ethics education to all those children who want it. The need is especially great in the outer suburbs of Sydney and in regional and country NSW. Those people interested in volunteering to either teach classes or who can coordinate the teaching of ethics classes at a school in their local area should go to the Primary Ethics website to view the position descriptions and to register their interest in volunteering: <http://www.primaryethics.com.au>.

Teachers who are on duty during SRE time at a particular school are not permitted by the Department of Education to teach Ethics classes there, just as they are not permitted to teach SRE.

## The ethics curriculum

The first semester of this year used a modified version of the 2010 pilot curriculum and classes are now moving to the first semester of the newly developed curriculum. Primary Ethics has created a curriculum framework that spans all seven years of primary school. This will be available shortly at <http://www.primaryethics.com.au>. Academics who specialise in this area have been engaged to write 280 lessons to populate the curriculum framework. Classes, which are now only available for Years 5 and 6 students, will be rolled out down to Kindergarten over the next few years, as lessons become available.

The curriculum is designed to teach children how to approach ethical issues while developing their capacity for moral reasoning. By considering a wide range of ethical issues appropriate to their particular level of development, children learn skills such as collaborative inquiry, logical reasoning, critical thinking and the capacity to evaluate good and bad moral reasoning.

The first topic in Kindergarten, *Thinking Together*, introduces children to the concept of a 'community of inquiry,' which is the foundation of ethical thinking. This theme is followed throughout the curriculum, being revisited in

different years through topics such as *Respectful Disagreement*, *Courage* and *Getting Even*.

Most of the topics in the curriculum provide students with the opportunity to develop increasingly sophisticated knowledge and skills in moral reasoning. Children in the younger primary years examine topics such as being left out, sharing and bullying, while older children reflect on issues such as homelessness and child labour to help them consider the feelings and interests of others. Other aspects include understanding consequences, having empathy, appreciating difference, having common capacities and giving equal consideration. These are tackled through a range of topics as diverse as *How Important is it to Look Good?* *Are Rules Always Fair?* *Pride*, *Teasing* and *Animal Rights*.

A series of lessons on the treatment of animals and the environment throughout the curriculum encourages thinking about how far individual moral responsibility should extend and engages students in considering the consequences of certain practices.

The idea of moral character is introduced in Kindergarten in *Being a Good Friend* and is then extended over the next few years in topics focusing on courage, pride, boasting and greed. Students will learn to recognise good and bad moral reasoning very early on, by introducing notions such as relevance, the difference between relevance and truth and the idea of weighing reasons against each other.

Throughout the curriculum, children are asked to provide reasons to support their arguments/positions and ethics teachers are trained to test the validity of given reasons. Blind appeal to authority and moral relativism are exposed as bad moral reasoning in *Advertising* and *Whaling* respectively. Later lessons progressively introduce logical concepts and processes, including conditionals, assumptions, induction and validity.

## Future plans

Primary Ethics is currently focused on the task of delivering ethics classes to primary aged children in NSW, despite a call from some parents to extend the program into high schools and across state boundaries. Once fully operational, the group expects to be one of the largest volunteer organisations in the country.



Teresa Russell is the mother of two primary school aged children. She joined the Primary Ethics Board after spending 2010 as the Ethics

Pilot Project Manager for St James Ethics Centre, managing all aspects of the successful 10-week pilot at 10 NSW primary schools.