

## Teaching ethics to Non-SRE students?

Recently, the newspapers reported that the NSW Federation of Parents and Teachers Associations was proposing that non-SRE (Special Religious Education, commonly known as “Scripture”) students should be able to study ethics during SRE time.

At first glance this would seem a useful idea. Students not attending SRE could do with some moral development course, even if it was only the study of ethics. Surely this would be better than sitting by themselves to do homework or under minimal supervision in the playground.

Before considering the merits or otherwise of ethics for non-SRE students it is important to understand the provision for SRE in government schools.

SRE is provided for under the Education Act 1990 and is voluntary. Parents who do not wish to have their children attend SRE have a right of withdrawal. In some schools, mainly high schools, there is a considerable number of non-SRE students.

The arrangements for SRE are that time is set aside for SRE and during that time no other lessons operate for the years groups having SRE. The main reason for this is that students attending SRE should not be disadvantaged in their schooling by missing other lessons. Holding other lesson would also create competition with SRE, placing parents in two minds as to which lessons might be best for their children at a particular time. So during time set aside for SRE other educational activities are suspended and non-SRE students can have private study, do their homework or be minimally supervised by the school.

This arrangement is part of a long-standing agreement between the church and the NSW Government from the Government’s acceptance of the SRE recommendations of the Rawlinson Report, *Religious Education in NSW Government Schools*.1981. If any subject was to be offered during SRE time the providers of SRE would most likely consider this a breach of that agreement.

There are other reasons to be considered here as well as the long standing agreement.

The first issue is, why ethics, why not basket weaving or additional mathematics or an advanced reading program? There is nothing special about ethics. If one subject can be offered in SRE time, then why not others?

Secondly, if ethics is so important why not have it introduced into the curriculum as a subject so that everyone can benefit or perhaps it is already there within Board of Studies syllabuses.

Who would teach this subject, volunteers? Currently government schools are not provided with staff for the SRE period, which is why some high schools who do not have SRE finish early on one day of the week. There would be a considerable cost to the Department if it now had to staff the SRE period with teachers of ethics or any other subject.

The fact is that this is not the first time this proposal has been put forward. Stuart Longstaff, Director, the St James Ethics Centre has suggested it in other parent newsletters. While one can appreciate the motives of the parents or community members behind this move, to create a more meaningful learning time for non-SRE

students, this proposal would undermine the operation of SRE in schools, eroding it and making SRE less viable.

As well as being a threat to SRE, the Government, should it entertain such a move, would find that it has a huge fight on its hands as not only the Christian churches but the Islamic Council of NSW, Jewish Board of Education, Buddhist Council of NSW and a host of other SRE providers in the community would be likely to be very upset with this proposal. Not a good start for a new Premier I would think, especially in 2006 leading up to an election.

At the end of the day the Parents and Citizens Conference wanted to change the Act to allow for ethics to be taught to non-SRE students. This would hardly seem a viable position given the above.

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