

Request for ministerial approval to proceed with a Pilot Project to test the concept of offering an Ethics-based Complement to Scripture in NSW Primary Schools

For the consideration of the Hon Verity Firth MP
NSW Minister for Education and Training/NSW Minister for Women

submitted by:

St James Ethics Centre in conjunction with the NSW Federation of P and C Associations. Should the submission be accepted a number of NSW Primary Schools have confirmed their support of and participation in the Pilot Project. These include: Baulkham Hills North Public, Bungendore Public, Darlinghurst Public, Ferncourt Public (South Marrickville), Hurstville Public, Neutral Bay Public and Rozelle Public.

For more details about endorsees of the pilot project please refer to appendix 1.

executive summary

St James Ethics Centre and the aforementioned parties request ministerial approval for a pilot project to test the concept of offering an ethics-based complement to scripture in NSW primary schools.

The proposal for the pilot is based on the result of a preliminary survey of community leaders and citizens who have indicated broad and diverse support for an ethics-based complement for those children whose parents have made a conscientious decision to have them not attend classes in Special Religious Education (SRE) at primary school. It also responds to the motion unanimously passed at the July 2009 Annual General Meeting of the NSW Federation of P and C Associations indicating the need for 'an ethics and/or philosophy based complement to special religious education'.

The pilot would serve three objectives. It would:

- provide a measure of effectiveness with regard to content and delivery,
- demonstrate the potential value of the material (and processes) for use by existing SRE providers (at their election),
- demonstrate community-wide interest and scope for application.

Currently, NSW Department of Education policy indicates that children whose parents choose that they not attend SRE classes are prohibited from receiving any form of instruction during this period, and specifically not in the area of ethics, values, civics and general religious education. We see this as a social justice and youth mental health issue. We think that all children attending public schools should be afforded an equal opportunity to deepen their understanding of what makes for a good life – without parents having to abandon their personal convictions in matters of religion. This is possible – as an introduction to ethics need not necessarily be tied to instruction in the precepts of religion. We view the existing education policy as socially unjust and urge the Minister to amend it.

The proposed pilot would not require an amendment to NSW Department of Education policy. It would only require ministerial approval to proceed. The outcomes of the pilot would place the Minister in a better position to make an informed decision about any further proposal to amend departmental policy.

proposed pilot project overview

Under the auspices of St James Ethics Centre, Philip Cam, Associate Professor, School of History and Philosophy at the University of New South Wales would lead curriculum development for the proposed pilot. Professor Cam is an internationally-recognised expert in the area of philosophical and ethical inquiry for children. He has consulted to numerous primary schools, locally and internationally, where philosophical inquiry has been introduced. Professor Cam has also written extensively for children and teachers, including publication of *Thinking Together: Philosophical Inquiry for the Classroom* and the *Thinking Stories* series of books.

It should be noted that we would welcome the contribution of the Department of Education and Training and/or the Board of Studies in the curriculum development, if so desired or required.

The pilot would be targeted to stage 3 (years 5 and 6) primary school students and would run for ten-weeks over one school term.

Teachers from participating schools have been invited to self-nominate to teach the ethics-based pilot under the tutelage of Professor Cam. In situations where a full-time teacher is unavailable due to workload constraints, as defined by the New South Wales Teachers Federation, part-time teachers or volunteers could be nominated.

Course content developed for the pilot would be made available, free of charge, to all interested parties. A number of faith-based groups have expressed interest in contributing to and/or accessing these ethics-based materials.

The proposed pilot would take place during the second term of 2010 pending confirmation of ministerial approval in October 2009.

Outcomes from the pilot would permit the Minister to assess the effectiveness of, and interest in, an ethics-based course.

background

> initial efforts to create an ethics-based complement to scripture

St James Ethics Centre first highlighted the need for an ethics-based complement to scripture in a 2003 proposal presented to former Minister of Education, Andrew Refshauge, on behalf of the Federation of P and C Associations. In his response, the then Minister Refshauge indicated there was neither scope for implementation, nor was there a community-wide call.

Evidence from a 2004 survey conducted by the Federation of P and C's, however, suggested that the Minister may have underestimated community interest:

- 59% of parents thought it was important or very important that their child be given the option of attending a secular, ethics-based class
- 79% of parents said they would support their children being exposed to faiths other than their own
- almost 25% of parents said they would like to see the teaching of faiths other than their own

Subsequent to the 2004 survey, the Centre's proposal was resubmitted by the P and C to the then Minister of Education, Carmel Tebbett - but it was once again rejected.

> renewed interest in a meaningful complement to scripture

>> community consultation (2008 - 2009)

Renewed approaches to St James Ethics Centre, in 2008, confirmed that community interest in this matter had not diminished. In response, the Centre invited the views of leaders and citizens

from a diverse range of relevant backgrounds: faith-based, youth mental health, community service, multi-partisan State government, and, education. Results of the consultation were overwhelmingly supportive of the proposition that a complementary alternative to SRE be developed and made available to primary school students in NSW. The vast majority canvassed agreed that every New South Wales child is entitled to meaningful instruction during the hours they attend school, and to ethical exploration or extension - regardless of whether it's tied to a particular religious tradition.

rationale for an ethics-based complement to scripture

> social justice

From a social justice perspective, the current policy discriminates against those children who do not attend scripture. While the standard curriculum certainly aims to educate children in values and principles, it is also acknowledged that those children attending scripture are able to have this work extended in lessons with a particular focus on this domain of life. It is unfair and unreasonable that some children be denied this opportunity for extension simply as a consequence of their parents' choice not to have them attend scripture classes. Indeed, the Rawlinson Committee, established to review Special Religious Education in the 1970s acknowledged that, '... ethics, the study of morals and values, is valuable for its own sake and people can be moral without being religious ...'.

The exact number of children who 'opt out' is not known as the statistics are not collected by the Department of Education. However, anecdotal reports suggest that as many as 25% of children enrolled in primary school are sitting idle for that period every week. This estimate is not unexpected if one considers the following Religious Affiliation statistics as last determined by the 2001 Census of Population and Housing:

Anglican	20.7%
Catholic	26.6%
Other Christian	20.7%
Other Religions	4.9%
No Religion	15.5%
Not stated/Inadequately described	11.7%

Many leaders from faith-based groups, with whom we have met - Uniting Church, Hindu and Islamic - all agree this is a social justice issue. Many welcome the possibility of an ethics-based course, partly because they are unable to meet the demand for instructors in their own faiths. Others have offered to contribute to or have asked for access to ethics-based materials to complement their own content. St James Ethics Centre welcomes the opportunity to work together and to share all materials specifically created by and for such a course.

> youth mental health

St James Ethics Centre has sought to understand the impact of ethical formation, or lack thereof, on youth mental health. Presumably, children who attend scripture have the opportunity to learn about values and virtues and examine fundamental questions such as, 'what is our purpose?' or 'what is the meaning of life?' However, what of those who are sitting in the hall? And what role does this extended exploration play on wellbeing? The results of investigations into such questions are compelling. What we have suspected intuitively, science has proven empirically.

In the last two decades, researchers across multiple disciplines - from psychology and medicine, to ethics and education - have shifted their focus from the cause of pathologies to the traits and qualities that create wellbeing or vital mental health.

The results: those who report the greatest life satisfaction or happiness, enjoy a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives; a sense of hopefulness (optimism) that they can make a difference; and, have an inclination to contribute because they believe their actions will have impact.

Sources: Martin Seligman, psychologist, *The Optimistic Child*
William Damon, professor of education, *The Path to Purpose*

The corollary: those who are at the greatest risk of depression, suffer a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. Encouragingly, according to numerous studies over the past decade, such sentiment can be overcome through early intervention which includes reflection and action (see appendix 2).

As stated previously, by denying some children the opportunity to extend their exploration of fundamental themes such as purpose, meaning and benevolent behaviour, we are essentially denying them an opportunity to contribute to their own wellbeing, and by extension, that of the community.

Research conducted by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 2003 indicates very high levels of emotional distress among people: approximately 12% among 12 to 17 year olds; 26% among 18 to 24 year olds. Furthermore adolescent depression is one of the most frequently reported mental health problems in Australia with rates of major depressive disorder ranging from 4 to 24%. Presumably any action taken to address the source of such alarming statistics would be in the best interest of all children.

nsw department of education and training perspectives - january 2009

> ethics as part of the standard NSW curriculum in primary schools

As the Ministry and Department have noted by way of correspondence and dialogue, ethics is an important part of learning in NSW primary schools with attention to its instruction in a number of areas within the curriculum. The proposal for an ethics-based course as a complement to scripture, however, has not been suggested because we, or those with whom we have consulted, see a gap in the area of delivery. The proposal addresses three issues:

- i. *the lack of meaningful instruction offered to children whose parents make a conscientious choice for them to opt out of scripture*
- ii. *the request, put forth by parents and the P and C, for a viable alternative*
- iii. *the value of allotted time to explore ethics-based materials as put forth in the above youth mental health rationale.*

That is, the current situation is one in which some students have the opportunity to deepen their engagement with issues of importance (including many dealt with in the course of the broader curriculum) – while others do not. We do not think it right that such an important opportunity be denied to some simply because of their parents' beliefs – especially when a viable alternative may be available.

> the role of the Inter-Church Consultative Committee on Religious Education in Schools (ICCOREIS)

As we have been advised by the Department, ICCOREIS is responsible for protecting the 120 year old agreement that secular, state schools must provide one hour a week of religious education. As such, it was suggested, it would be a significant challenge to have NSW Department of Education policy amended without the consensus of this group.

We recognise the concern, held by all, that NSW Primary Schools be recognised as a suitable environment for the education of students of all faiths – and of those whose parents profess no faith. Indeed, we would be reluctant to take any step that would dissuade people of faith from sending their children to NSW Primary Schools and think the proposal to provide an ethics-based complement minimises this risk in the following ways:

- i. St James Ethics Centre is not advocating any change to the legislation or the policy that protects the provision of SRE in NSW primary schools. The Centre fully respects the role of religious instruction in primary schools and the principle under which faith groups are encouraged to provide it.

An amendment to NSW Department of Education policy to allow for the provision of an ethics-based course would not adversely affect the rights of those who attend scripture.

Rather, it would simply serve to recognise and address the interests of those whose parents have made the conscientious decision to opt out.

ii. the majority of faith-based leaders with whom we have met feel that all children are entitled to broaden and deepen their access to ethics instruction. Indeed, a number of those who are unable to provide ample scripture instructors to meet demand, or resources to develop curriculum, viewed the provision of an ethics-based course as a valuable option – allowing them to draw on and amend the material, for their particular use, until such time as they can develop their own resources.

A minority of faith-based representatives expressed concern that an ethics-based course would draw children away from scripture. Others felt that they had all the material needed for their own faith's or denomination's needs and that they would not derive the benefit recognised by others.

However, in our mind this raises again the question of justice. Why should the fact that the needs of some are well met allow for the unmet needs of all others to persist? This question is especially pertinent in relation to children who are forced to be 'sidelined' as the price to be paid for their parents' conscientious objection to participation in scripture classes conducted to promulgate faiths to which they do not subscribe.

iii. ICCOREIS may represent the official views of the faiths represented on its committee but not necessarily the views of ordinary members of faith-based communities. Many of those with whom we have consulted are committed, practicing members of faith-based groups. From a social justice perspective, they argue that all children have a right to an equal measure of meaningful instruction during the period allotted to scripture and offer support for an ethics-based course for those children, whose parents have made a conscientious decision for them, to opt out.

iv. the right for parents to act in good conscience and opt for their children not to attend scripture classes was not created as a result of achieving consensus within ICCOREIS. Rather, this right was recognised and protected by the community as a whole. We would suggest that the right to ethical instruction for all children ought to be determined on the same basis.

That is, we do not think it appropriate, in a democracy, that a decision of this kind effectively be delegated by government to ICCOREIS. Its members are sincere and fair-minded people. However, they are – by definition – members of ICCOREIS precisely because they represent a specific range of world views based on profound religious conviction. As such, it is impossible for them to consider such matters from the disinterested stance that is required for the development of public policy.

in conclusion

Over the last twelve months St James Ethics Centre has engaged with leaders and citizens from a diverse range of communities: faith-based, youth mental health, academic, education and social service. Many were unaware of NSW Department of Education's policy prohibiting children, whose parents have made a conscientious decision for them to opt out of scripture, from receiving any form of instruction during this period. Some were incensed that such a policy still exists today in a country that Prime Minister Rudd describes as 'modern Australia'. All agree that this is a social justice issue. In a 'modern', pluralistic and progressive Australia all children ought to be treated fairly and equally, regardless of their or, more precisely, their parents' religious persuasion.

We write, once again, to appeal to your sense of social justice and fair play, as well as your party's commitment to an inclusive society for all Australians.

We look forward to a favourable response and take this opportunity to reiterate – we would welcome the Ministry and Department's contribution to the creation of the proposed pilot to test the concept of offering an ethics-based complement to scripture in NSW primary schools.

Distribution:

Coleen MacKinnon, St James Ethics Centre

Dianne Giblin, President, NSW Federation of P and C

Michael Coutts-Trotter, Director General, Dept of Education and Training

Julia Gillard, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Minister for Education, Minister for Social Inclusion.

Sarah Flynn, Baulkham Hills North Public School

Sharon Baxter-Judge, Bungendore Public School

Alexandra McCormick, Darlinghurst Public School

Carolyn Smith & Melinda Leves-Isted, Ferncourt Public School

Anita Rooney, Hurstville Public School

Martijn Walker, Neutral Bay Public

Howard Packer, Rozelle Public School

Towards an Ethics-based Compliment to Scripture in NSW Primary Schools

community endorsees

>> nsw federation of p and c associations

NSW Federation of P and C Associations
Dianne Giblin, President

NSW Federation of P and C Associations
Sharryn Brownlee, Past President

>> community organisations

NSW Commission for Children and Young People
Gaye Phillips, Commissioner
Steven Robertson, Director of Influencing

The Human Rights Council of Australia Inc
Andre Frankovits, Executive Director

Australian Government Primary Principals Association
Anthony McGruther, Immediate Past President

Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Associations
Professor Philip Cam, NSW President

School Aid
Julie Urquhart, CEO

>> youth mental health organisations and experts

Inspire Foundation
Kerry Graham, CEO

Positive Psychology Institute
Dr Suzy Green, Founding Partner

The Happiness Institute
Dr Tim Sharp, Psychologist, Founder and CEO

>> faith-based ministries:

Uniting Church
John Oldmeadow, Executive Director Board of Education

Hindu Council of Australia
Vijai Singhal, Secretary

Australian Federation of Islamic Councils Inc
Ikebal Patel, President

>> principals and assistant principals

Anita Rooney
Principal, Hurstville Public School

Tina Cowley

Assistant Principal, Hurstville Public School

Ruth Turnell
Principal, Ferncourt Public School

Dorothy Hoddinott AO
Principal, Holroyd High School

Pilot Project Schools:

(The following schools have confirmed interest in taking part in the proposed pilot project to test the concept of offering an Ethics-based Complement to Scripture)

Baulkham Hills North Public School
Sarah Flynn, Vice-President, P and C

Bungendore Public School
Allan Donnelly, Member, P and C
Sharon Baxter-Judge, President, P and C

Darlinghurst Public School
Alex McCormick, Secretary P and C

Ferncourt Public School - South Marrickville
Carolyn Smith & Melinda Leves-Isted, Co-Presidents, P and C

Hurstville Public School
Wendy Pan, Secretary, P and C

Neutral Bay Public School
Paul Fraser, President, P and C
Martijn Walker, member, school council

Rozelle Public School
Howard Packer, President, P and C

appendix 2

Constructive Interventions:

a sampling of research linking purpose, virtue and optimism with vital mental health

> purpose

Damon, William, Faculty of Education, Stanford University, *The Path to Purpose* - based on the results of a four-year nationwide study, Damon reports that the epidemic of disengaged and drifting kids is directly linked to the lack of purpose or meaning they find in their lives.

> volunteerism

From Tony Ryan, educational consultant and author, Brisbane, Australia

“Active citizens, of any age, discover a sense of accomplishment and lifelong purpose that comes from offering their talents to others.”

> virtuous behaviour and vital mental health

The following studies cited by
Dr Stephen Post, bioethicist, Case Western Reserve University
When Good Things Happen to Good People.

> > generosity

David Sloan Wilson, evolutionary biologist and psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi illustrate that giving actually reduces adolescent depression and suicide risk. In fact, the teens who are giving, hopeful and socially effective are also happier and more active, involved, excited and challenged than their less engaged counterparts.

Paul Wink, Wellesley College, in a study following 200 people since the 1920s, has proven that giving in high school predicts good physical and mental health all the way into late adulthood.

> > gratitude

In a study of organ recipients, Robert Emmons of the University of California at Davis reported that those people who had a sense of gratitude for their 'gift of life', recovered more quickly than those who did not express the same appreciation.

Dr Rollin McCraty, Institute of HeartMath, has found that states of appreciation are correlated with a physiological state known as resonance also experienced during deep relaxation and sleep. In such a state, heart rhythms are coherent and ordered -calming our neurological and endocrine systems.

> > compassion

In a study involving one hundred and thirty seven MS sufferers, neurologist Dr Carolyn Schwartz determined that giving support improved health more than receiving it. Those who offered compassionate listening and support felt a dramatic change in how they viewed themselves and life. Depression, self-confidence and self-esteem improved markedly amongst the giving group.

> optimism

Dr Martin Seligman, University of Pennsylvania
The Optimistic Child and Authentic Happiness.

Seligman's research defines the role of optimism, hope and meaning in the creation of authentic happiness and fulfilment. It elaborates on the cause of hopelessness and helplessness, precursors of depression, and reveals how exploration of outlook and impact can serve as a preventative.

22 September 2009