

Primary Ethics Response to the *Review of Special Religious Education and Special Education in Ethics in NSW Government Schools – April 2017*

Primary Ethics supports children to develop skills in ethical reasoning, critical thinking and respectful discussion. Using a community of inquiry approach to learning, we provide age-appropriate lesson materials prepared by curriculum experts, training and ongoing support as well as authorisation processes to enable parents and community volunteers to work together to deliver ethics classes in primary schools.

Our goal is to grow our program to ensure that all parents and carers of children in NSW public primary schools have the option of choosing ethics as a secular alternative to scripture for their child, should they wish.

In 2017 our team of 2,500 trained volunteers provides ethics classes to more than 35,000 students each school week. Primary Ethics does not receive government funding. We rely on the generosity of donors and volunteers to provide this unique learning experience for children.



Primary Ethics welcomes the release of the *Review of Special Religious Education and Special Education in Ethics in NSW Government Schools* report prepared by ARTD Consultants released in April 2017.

The report recognised that our curriculum is of high quality and that our volunteer authorisation processes are robust and comprehensive.

The report makes six recommendations for Special Ethics Education providers. These are listed in Table 1 along with Primary Ethics' response to each.

The report also makes recommendations for the NSW Department of Education. Some of these recommendations, and the Department's responses, impact the ability of parents to select ethics for their child. Primary Ethics urges the NSW government to adopt measures to ensure parents are able to make a fully informed choice to select the option that best suits their child. To this end Primary Ethics requests that the Department of Education:

- change the current enrolment form to ensure clarity for parents and carers so that they can choose Special Religious Education, Special Education in Ethics or neither for their child (this relates to, and goes beyond, recommendation 5 of the report)
- adopt an opt-in process for all options as opting in is consistent with informed consent (this relates to, and goes beyond, recommendation 8 of the report)
- collate information on participation in Special Education in Ethics, Special Religious Education and share non-identifiable regional and state wide data with Primary Ethics and religious education providers to enable program planning (related to recommendation 40)

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Further, Primary Ethics:

- supports the Department’s efforts to ensure all school communities are well informed about Special Education in Ethics and will work with schools to achieve this (relating to recommendations 43 and 46)
- welcomes the opportunity to work with the NSW Department of Education to improve the *Special Education in Ethics Implementation Procedures* to ensure greater clarity for all stakeholders (recommendation 41)
- appreciates the Department’s advice to date and will continue to seek advice from the Department to ensure the age appropriateness of all lesson materials in our curriculum (recommendation 48)

In addition, Primary Ethics supports actions to improve processes, including complaints management and provider authorisation.

Table 1: Primary Ethics’ response to recommendations for providers of Special Education in Ethics

Recommendation	Primary Ethics response
47. Primary Ethics to conduct regular audits of SEE teaching and use of approved curriculum and publicly report the results of the audits and any efforts to address any issues identified.	The Primary Ethics classroom support team visits ethics classes to assist volunteer ethics teachers with facilitation and classroom behaviour management skills. The team also notes whether the teacher is following the curriculum. From July 2017 the team will be asked to store curriculum compliance data in an accessible form so that it can be published. Primary Ethics plans to publish compliance rates annually commencing December 2017.
52. Any future providers of SEE should make publicly available their complaints policy and procedures.	Primary Ethics has a publicly available complaints policy and procedure, as noted in the report.
53. Primary Ethics regularly monitors SEE teachers’ performance and learning needs and provide more individual support to address these needs including mentoring and observation of individual SEE teachers’ practices.	Primary Ethics classroom support team visits ethics classes both proactively and on request to assist teachers with facilitation skills, classroom behaviour management and any other issues that arise. Primary Ethics continues to grow this team of skilled volunteers and provides ongoing training and online resources for all volunteers.

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Recommendation	Primary Ethics response
54. Primary Ethics provides training in use of interactive whiteboards and digital projectors for SEE teachers.	Ethics classes are based on philosophical discussion and, as noted in the report, technology is not required for any lesson. Ethics classes are often held in spaces with no access to technology. Ethics teachers sometimes use technology to display, rather than print, the images that are part of the topic stimulus. When a volunteer wishes to use the school's technology they seek the permission and advice of the classroom teacher. Primary Ethics supports teachers with basic information on using technology to support class discussions.
55. Primary Ethics curriculum developers to map the SEE curriculum against the learning continuum provided by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). Requesting the curriculum developers to note aspects of the SEE curriculum that support content descriptions and learning areas within the Australian Curriculum where applicable and appropriate.	A curriculum mapping project commenced in May 2016. It is anticipated the results of the mapping project will be available in early 2018.
56. Primary Ethics curriculum developers consider whether there is a need to reduce the amount of repetition in the curriculum to prevent older primary aged students from disengaging.	<p>As noted in the ARTD report, the learning model used in ethics classes contains an element of repetition, as is necessary in any skills development program. Some concepts, such as fairness, are revisited in different ways across a number of learning stages to build student understanding. Lessons often contain scenarios that are similar but subtly different – and it is the subtle differences which provoke the deeper consideration designed to help students practice and develop their critical thinking and moral reasoning skills.</p> <p>Primary Ethics contacted the ARTD authors and education sub consultant to ascertain the nature of concerns about repetition. No information was forthcoming. As ethics teachers contribute feedback into our lesson material review process, opportunities for increased student engagement are evaluated and incorporated wherever practical.</p>