

Primary Ethics position statement on class size

Primary Ethics recognises the importance of class size in achieving a high quality and sustainable program in NSW public schools and has determined that Early Stage 1-4 ethics classes be a minimum of 8 students and a maximum of 22 students.

The purpose of this position statement on class size is to provide information for Primary Ethics volunteer managers, ethics coordinators and ethics teachers, as representatives of the approved provider of Special Education Ethics (SEE). Having an understanding of why there is a need for a recommended class size for ethics classes (for instance, when compared to standard school class sizes*) will assist with communications and support the quality and sustainability of the program.

The recommended class size for ethics classes is based on the unique characteristics of the Primary Ethics curriculum in NSW public schools in terms of: the nature of the students being taught and the teachers who are teaching them, as well as what is being taught and the approach or how it is taught. When these characteristics are considered together, Primary Ethics believes there is a strong and robust argument for class size to reflect the different needs of the ethics curriculum and that the class size recommendation be followed. This position statement contains:

Item	Title	Page
1	Summary of remedies for ethics class size issues	1
2	Background information	2
3	Why Primary Ethics recommends classes be a minimum of 8 and a maximum of 22 students	3-5
4	References	5

1. Summary of remedies for class size issues

Ethics class formation including class size is part of the role of the school SRE/SEE coordinator (details below in Background). When liaising with school staff, volunteers are to be mindful that school staff may not be aware of all the relevant information (see *Information for Schools – Teachers Guide* located in the Document Library in the Primary Ethics Learning Centre). Consider all the options available when making decisions and contact the Primary Ethics office for further advice and support.

In the case where the class has **more than 22 students**, options include:

- the school reorganise this oversized class into two classes and allocate two ethics teachers (this decision may mean other/another class/es is postponed); or
- the school reorganise this oversized class into two classes and one ethics teacher takes each class week - about (a useful short- term remedy allowing time for recruitment of teachers); or
- the school reorganise this oversized class by reallocating students in a class/es of the relevant stage.

The practice of two ethics teachers OR one supportive/approving ethics teacher being allocated to an oversized class is not consistent with Primary Ethics' stated values and therefore should not to be considered as a remedy. Please contact Primary Ethics for advice.

In the case where the class has **less than 8 students**, options include:

- the school reorganises students into existing ethics classes on the basis of stage; or
- implementation of this class be postponed until student numbers reach (or are likely soon to reach) the minimum number

2. Background information related to the NSW Department of Education:

According to the Department of Education Special Education in Ethics Procedures: (author's underline)

- SEE is organised in primary schools by negotiation and agreement between the relevant principal and the approved providers (3.2).
- School principals are responsible for identifying students whose parents/carers have chosen ethics classes and for ****forming ethics classes on the basis of the needs of students and resource availability and suitability.** In relation to the latter, school principals must ensure that adequate facilities are provided for the delivery of ethics classes, including adequate accommodation and access to classrooms (3.2).
- School principals are responsible for providing class lists and any special information, such as disability or special needs, which might affect the health, behaviour or performance of particular students (3.4).

It is important to note that the department's *Special Education in Ethics Procedures* **does not** explicitly refer to class size when forming ethics classes and, by this omission, the school principal has discretionary powers. In the department's *Religion and Ethics/Support Materials/ Frequently asked questions* relating to class organisation, however, it is stated that 'There are no minimum number of students required to establish an SRE or SEE class. Schools should be mindful of an approved provider's recommended minimum and maximum number of students.'

It is interesting to note that the department **does** provide school principals with detailed class size advice when staffing classes with qualified teachers. Ethics teachers are not qualified teachers.

From the Agreement between the *NSW Department of Education and the NSW Teachers Federation on the Staffing of NSW Public Schools 2016-2020* (point 22)

*Class Sizes

ES1-1/K-2: the state-wide average class sizes are **20 in Kindergarten, 22 in Year 1, 24 in Year 2**

S2-3/Years 3-6: no class need exceed **30 students**

S4-5/Years 7-10: no class need exceed **30 students (with exceptions for practical classes)**

S6/Years 11-12: no class need exceed **24 students**

3. Why ethics classes have a minimum of 8 students and a maximum of 22 students:

For Primary Ethics, class size is critical to the quality and the sustainability of the program. The recommended class size for ethics classes is based on key characteristics of the ethics curriculum when applied to:

- *who* is being taught - Early Stage 1-4 students
- *what* is being taught - the content
- *how* this is taught - the pedagogy
- *by whom* is this taught - volunteer ethics teachers.

These characteristics (described below) distinguish the ethics curriculum from other school education programs and approaches.

Stated simply, ethics classes with less than the recommended 8 students and more than 22 impact the efficacy of the ethics program for the students *and* ethics teachers – the demands on the ethics teacher and the students would be different.

Who is being taught in ethics lessons:

Section 33A of the Education Act 1990 allows special education ethics (SEE) as an option for children whose parents have withdrawn them from special religious education (SRE). Primary Ethics developed the curriculum for primary school students, Kindergarten to Year 6 (ES1-3), to be delivered by volunteer ethics teachers in one 30 - minute lesson per week. Ethics classes comprise students from diverse backgrounds and with varied physical, emotional, social, intellectual characteristics and wide-ranging learning needs.

The ethics curriculum is organised in stages (ES1-3) rather than in years (K-6). This means that composite classes of Years 1-2, 3-4, and 5-6 can be formed and taught the appropriate stage Ethics topics and lessons. If the class is a cross-stage composite i.e. Years 2-3, 4-5 then the lower stage Ethics topics and lessons are taught (e.g. your class has students from S1-2 so teach the Stage 1 curriculum).

The ethics curriculum for secondary school students, Years 7-8 (S4), is currently under-development.

What is taught in ethics lessons:

The curriculum aims to equip students with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to explore the questions:

‘What ought we to do?’ ‘What sort of person do I want to be?’ and ‘What might a fair society look like?’

In the process the curriculum supports students to:

- Develop critical thinking skills and attitudes, such as logical reasoning skills and fairmindedness- that is, a willingness to take the views of others seriously and to assess conflicting views on the basis of reason and evidence
- Build their capacity for questioning and inquiry and for engaging in respectful dialogue with their peers
- Recognise and engage widely with ethical issues
- Think for themselves about moral principles, values and virtues as well as concepts such as equal human worth, and the common good

- Engage with a some of the elements of sound ethical decision-making, such as:
 - Employing critical thinking skills
 - Recognising common capacities for suffering and well-being and empathising with others
 - Considering not only our own interests, but also the interests of others
 - Considering the consequences of our actions, and taking circumstances into account
 - Taking intention into account
 - Thinking about where our moral duty lies and what it means to treat someone as a means to our own ends
 - Thinking about whether a proposed action is consistent with the kind of person we should want to be

- Employ some of these factors in their own moral decision-making.

The approach taken by Primary Ethics is that ethical exploration in the classroom is best done through dialogue and discussion – a tradition of philosophical inquiry that goes back to Socrates and which is tied to the idea of living an ‘examined life’. This approach has significant social benefits. By learning to think about ethical matters together and through the give-and-take of respectful and reasoned argument, students will learn to consider other people’s points of view and to be sincere, reasonable and respectful in dealing with their differences and disagreements.

The ethics curriculum is regularly reviewed by NSW Department of Education and approved as age-appropriate for students.

How are ethics lessons taught:

The ethics curriculum is strongly influenced by the work of Matthew Lipman’s community of inquiry approach to learning. Using Socratic questioning, led by the ethics teacher, students engage in a structured, open-ended style of inquiry with their peers. The questioning stimulates discussion about big questions and things that matter, draws attention to particular arguments and counter arguments, and helps students to find their own voice and to hear others’ views on the ethical issues being discussed. Ethics lessons occur each week for on average 30 minutes. Students are seated in a circle with the ethics teacher so that everyone can see and hear one another and so engage in this inquiry with one another. Ethics teachers are required to follow the structured and detailed lessons closely and use only those resources provided by Primary Ethics. While the whole - group structured discussion is the dominant strategy employed in ethics lessons, students may also engage in discussion in pairs, reading selected stimulus materials, and recording group work ideas.

Who is teaching ethics lessons:

Primary Ethics enables volunteers to teach ethics to students in public schools. Volunteers are usually members of the school community (parents and carers, grandparents of the children in the school) or members of the wider community. Ethics teachers come from diverse backgrounds, have varied life experiences and come with a range of knowledge and skills. While some may have a school education background, most do not. This means that for most volunteers, both the school environment as well as the classroom environment is unfamiliar.

Ethics teachers have successfully applied to teach ethics with Primary Ethics, then completed online teacher training followed by two days of face-to-face ethics teacher training. They have also completed the necessary compliance requirements of the NSW Department of Education. Our Classroom Support team members support ethics teachers with their practice and professional development workshops, as well as regional and state conferences, are also provided for volunteers to motivate and grow their skills and knowledge. Ethic teachers have committed to teaching ethics for the year and are required to access lesson materials and prepare for the weekly lessons. While a few ethics teachers may have qualifications in philosophy, most will have a personal interest. This explains why the PE curriculum is prescriptive, with topics and detailed lesson plans and resources being provided for ethics teachers.

The role of ethics teacher in a community of inquiry is one of guiding and uncovering, rather than the more traditional approaches of solving, answering and fixing. Similarly, ethics lessons focus on curiosity, puzzlement and discovery, which is very different from a focus on the acquisition of knowledge, topic content and learning outcomes. Ethics teachers aim to develop students’ skills

experientially, gradually helping them to become more willing and able to consider and discuss ethical issues. They achieve this by engaging students and engendering curiosity in the topic, by modelling an inquiry process, managing the discussion and creating an environment in which students can think, develop and voice their ideas and opinions in concert with their peers, and learn about themselves and others.

4. Reference List

NSW Department of Education:

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/learning-across-the-curriculum/religion-and-ethics/about-religion-and-ethics>

Agreement between Department of Education and NSW Teachers Federation on the staffing of NSW public schools 2016-2020

<https://www.teach.nsw.edu.au/documents/agreement.pdf>

NSW Department of Education Policy:

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/special-education-in-ethics-policy>

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/associated-documents/SEImplementproced.pdf>

NSW Department of Education FAQ:

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/learning-across-the-curriculum/religion-and-ethics/support-materials/frequently-asked-questions#Class4>

Primary Ethics:

Primary Ethics Teacher Handbook (revised May 2019)

<https://primaryethics.com.au/about-ethics-classes/curriculum-objectives/>