

# MEDIA RELEASE

## **Bishop Peter Ingham on behalf of the Catholic Bishops of New South Wales regarding the decision of the NSW Government to allow ethics classes to run during Special Religious Education (SRE) time from 2011.**

The Catholic Church is disappointed by the decision to run Ethics Classes during time traditionally set aside for Special Religious Education (SRE). It shows little consideration of the numerous cost neutral, simple solutions open to the Government, to provide for students who opt out of Scripture Classes, such as the Premiers Reading Challenge, homework completion, research projects, and literacy initiatives, that were all viable options open to the Government.

The Catholic Church has made it clear that a good ethics course would be a welcome addition to the general curriculum. It should be run at a different time to SRE so all students can participate in it. The fact that there were numerous issues with the ten showpiece trial lessons from the St James Ethics Centre, gives cause for concern about what might appear in the other 96% of the curriculum once it is developed. Criticism of the failure of lessons to provide clear direction about right or wrong, or to give a moral compass, stand out as clear issues in Dr Knight's report on the trial. Additionally, the questions raised by Dr Sue Knight about the sources of funding for the course and the volunteers to teach it, have not been adequately addressed. This is a significant issue, given that the St James Ethics Centre was seemingly unable to simply find enough volunteer teachers for just the ten schools that self nominated for the trial.

Now that the decision has been made by the Government to introduce ethics classes next year, we would hope that the Minister ensures that the St James Ethics Centre produces a sound curriculum, provides adequate training and good resources. More to the point, the Church would expect that the St James Ethics Centre provides ethics classes at no cost to taxpayers or the Government, in the same way that religious groups have done for 130 years.

Around 30% of students who did not attend Scripture, also chose not to go to the trial ethics classes. We ask the Government to solve to this original problem of having appropriate educational options for students who opt out of SRE by reexamining the sensible list of options proposed by the Inter Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools (ICCOREIS) throughout the debate.

The Catholic Church has a very balanced, full SRE curriculum, which includes thorough ethical instruction for making good life choices. The uptake of Scripture by students and families in Government Schools remains very strong right throughout NSW. The roughly 12,000 scripture teachers statewide, are one of the biggest volunteer forces in New South Wales. Not only do faith traditions provide good ethical teaching, but an understanding of how a relationship with God helps answer the big questions of life, provide an understanding of sacred scripture, rites of passage, history, and prayer.

It has been most unjust, that in the midst of this debate about Ethics classes, the wonderful work of Scripture Teachers and the incredible contribution they have made to the common good of our society, has not been properly recognised.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read '+ Peter Ingham'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Peter Ingham  
Bishop of Wollongong on behalf of the Catholic Bishops of NSW  
23 November 2010.