

SCHOOL ETHICS PILOT ORGANISERS SEEK MEETING WITH JENSEN

The NSW P&C Federation and St James Ethics Centre today renewed their invitation to Sydney Anglican Archbishop Peter Jensen to meet to discuss the upcoming pilot of an ethics course in 10 NSW primary schools. The pilot will enable the evaluation of a program designed for students who have opted out of scripture and who currently are prohibited from formal learning during weekly scripture time (SMH, <http://bit.ly/dcoVyd>, page 1 today).

A cross section of faith based groups were invited to meet during the planning phase for the pilot, but Sydney Archbishop Jensen declined the offer.

Dr Simon Longstaff, Executive Director of the St James Ethics Centre, which with the P&C Federation is organising the 10 week pilot that will run during Term 2, said:

“Archbishop Peter Jensen has distanced himself from the many religious and non-religious parents, across NSW, who have championed the trial. A diversity of faith groups including: the Uniting Church, Islamic Council and Hindu Council has also welcomed the pilot.

“There is absolutely no desire or intention to weaken religion or eliminate scripture from schools and to suggest otherwise is misleading.

“Current education policy prohibits non-scripture students from any formal learning during scripture time. This pilot is designed to provide students, who elect to opt out of scripture, with a meaningful alternative to fill in what is now, for them, a measure of wasted time.

“My hope is that faith groups will embrace this opportunity to help make the period, currently set aside for SRE, meaningful for all students. It would be inspiring to see faith groups rallying to the challenge of developing programs that genuinely appeal to students and parents – perhaps even drawing on the material that is to be developed and shared if an ongoing ethics program is approved.

“Society is changing. The reality is that, prior to this trial being mounted, in some schools, from 50 to 80 percent of students were electing not to go to scripture. This carefully designed course will allow these children to encounter the ethical issues considered in scripture, but without an overarching theology. They will be invited to consider, ‘what should a person do?’ when faced with the challenging issues arising in a young person’s life.”

“The curriculum for the pilot has been designed by an international expert in philosophical and ethical enquiry for children, Professor Phillip Cam, from the University of NSW.

“Volunteers drawn from each school community will teach the pilot program. They participated in a two day, face to face, training course run by Professor Cam. All have been subject to formal background checks.

“We have consistently advocated for a thorough evaluation of the pilot program. We are confident that this process will be undertaken and the final report written in an independent, professional and disinterested manner – with the findings being open, to all – on an equal footing – for subsequent discussion.

Di Giblin, NSW P&C Federation President said, “There’s enormous interest among parents for a secular based option to scripture, with more schools hoping to take part in the pilot than we can accommodate.”

The ten schools whose P&C body self-nominated to take part in the trial are: Darlinghurst, Bungendore, Haberfield, Rozelle, Hurstville, Ferncourt (Marrickville), Baulkham Hills North, Leichhardt, Randwick and Crown Street Public Schools.

For interview: Dr Simon Longstaff - 0418 410 187, Ms Giblin 0404 802 637. Professor Cam 0422 470 650.

For further information: Teresa Russell, Project Manager, Towards an Ethics-based Complement to Scripture. 0400 002 349. Visit <http://specialethicseducation.com.au/> for an outline of the curriculum and a detailed Q&A section.