

Almighty row over ethics class in schools

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THE State Government's religious education advisory panel will fight a pilot program that offers ethics classes to primary school students who opt out of scripture.

Instead, it will continue its support for a policy that prevents students who opt out from having any instruction, and specifically no ethical instruction, during the time set aside for scripture each week.

In some schools, that leaves as many as 80 per cent of students excluded from education for an hour each week - despite reviews dating back to 1980 recommending the policy be amended.

The pilot, developed by the St James Ethics Centre, is fully funded and was endorsed unanimously by the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW in July. But it must still be approved by the Minister for Education in consultation with a religious advisory panel.

"It doesn't have the support of the religious community, that's just a pragmatic reality," the acting chairman of the Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools, Reverend Mark Hillis, told the *Herald*. "I don't see how having a small interest group coming into a school and ramping up things helps."

The pilot would begin as a 10-part discussion-based program, covering issues such as truth and fairness, offered to students in years 5 and 6. It was taken, in various form, to two previous education ministers but was rejected both times.

The present minister, Verity Firth, was first approached last November and was given a formal proposal on Wednesday. She would not comment on the proposal, other than to say it was being considered.

Philip Cam, a University of NSW philosophy professor involved in developing the pilot, said it would allow children "twiddling their thumbs" to think critically about ethical issues that may otherwise be discussed in scripture. "The question is about giving kids a chance to reflect on values - to think them through," he said. "They don't get as much opportunity to do that day-to-day as they ought."

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/almighty-row-over-ethics-class-in-schools-20090925-g6a0.html>