

Parents line up to give students ethics lessons

THE Education Minister, Verity Firth, will require the "wisdom of Solomon" to extricate herself from the furor developing over a pilot program offering ethics education to primary school students who opt out of scripture classes.

Parent groups at seven NSW primary schools, including Rozelle Public in Ms Firth's electorate, want to operate the program being devised by the St James Ethics Centre.

But the NSW Government's advisory panel, the Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools, opposes the introduction of the program saying it is being pushed by a small interest group.

Howard Packer, the president of the Rozelle Public School Parents and Citizens, said ethics classes would be a vote winner in the marginal electorate. He said most of the electorate was secular but supportive of a values-based education.

A barrister and Labor Party member who is active in the Uniting Church, Mr Packer said he was cognisant of the "bravery" and "wisdom of Solomon" required from the minister to support the proposal.

"There is a very close relationship between the ALP and the Catholic Church which should never be discounted," he said.

"The Catholic Church and the Anglicans are strongly opposed [to the ethics program], but the Uniting Church board of education is supportive.

"Originally churches ran education in NSW and, when government schools began, a trade-off mandating a period of religious instruction was struck.

"[The churches] have seen that watered down and I guess they fear the further erosion."

The pilot ethics program is fully funded and was endorsed unanimously by the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW in July.

Government policy prevents students who opt out of religious education from having any instruction, and specifically no ethical instruction.

In some schools that leaves as many as 80 per cent of students excluded from education for an hour each week.

The pilot would begin as a 10-part discussion-based program for students in years 5 and 6, covering issues such as truth and fairness.

An ethics program was taken to two previous education ministers but was rejected both times.

Yesterday Ms Firth said the matter was being considered but declined to comment further.

The Opposition's spokesman on education, Adrian Piccoli, said the content of ethics classes would raise as many questions for parents as scripture classes. He said the minister should consult curriculum experts about the education needs of primary schoolchildren before making any decision.

The president of the NSW P&C Federation, Dianne Giblin, told ABC Radio that students who opted out of scripture were being discriminated against. "All the other young children are allowed to go off to their various faiths and look at their own ethics and their own values and morals, and the rest of the school are not allowed to do anything else," she said.

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/parents-line-up-to-give-students-ethics-lessons-20090929-gb4e.html>