

***The Importance of Teaching* white paper: a response from the Accord Coalition**

Summary

The Accord Coalition welcomes that the Government has made its education reform such a high priority and is investing so much energy into developing its proposals. However, we are very concerned by many aspects of its white paper.

We are disappointed that it does not highlight many of the existing weakness in the current provision of RE or Collective Worship in a great many schools, nor indicates that the Government intends to look as these two areas. Although the paper refers to improving the quality of all PSHE teaching (section 4.30), we are also saddened that the Government is not proposing to include the subject in a revised National Curriculum. We hope too that the standing of Citizenship education is sustained or strengthened, rather than reduced.

We are deeply concerned that the scope and frequency of Ofsted inspections are to be down graded. We believe it is vital that Ofsted's remit to inspect how effectively schools promote community cohesion is broadened, as many schools only superficially adhere to this legal duty, and that if the Government were to stop Ofsted from inspecting how schools' promoted community cohesion it would send a green light to those who want to promote religious obscurantism in our schools. As the Government gives schools greater freedom, it follows that they should also ensure greater rather than less monitoring to make certain that those new freedoms are not abused.

More generally we are concerned that in its wider desire to give schools greater freedom and autonomy, such as over pupil admissions and the curriculum, the Government risks empowering those who would mitigate against social cohesion, which is mush ensure against.

Ofsted Inspection

The Accord Coalition strongly supports the role Ofsted has in inspecting state funded schools' compliance with their legal duty to promote community cohesion. The duty was a significant measure introduced to address widespread public concern about faith schools and came into effect on 1 September 2007.

However, we are aware that the current inspection regime on community cohesion risks appearing cursory and we are very disappointed that Ofsted does not look at factors such as how a school's admission policy, teacher employment policy and the kind of RE, Collective Worship and Citizenship it provides, impacts upon its contribution towards promoting community cohesion. We believe that Ofsted's remit and scope in this regard should be made much wider and that inspectors should be required to take in account these criteria that we highlight. We believe this would make the inspection of schools adherence to their community cohesion duty much more meaningful, represent a better use of inspectors' time and produce information that is of far greater benefit to parents, local communities and government.

We note that the white paper proposes to reduce Ofsted's inspection framework from 27 headings to four and are very worried that the Government may be considering stopping inspectors from assessing schools' effectiveness with which they promote community cohesion (6.18). We note with

interest the report released last month from Policy Exchange *Faith Schools We Can Believe In*¹, which stated that our education system was not currently equipped to deal with schools' increasingly vulnerability from extremist influences. We therefore firmly believe that Ofsted's requirement to inspect the effectiveness with which schools promote community cohesion should be broadened, and that the Government would be backtracking on a vital obligation if the requirement was removed or scaled back.

We also believe that other criteria that Ofsted inspects, such as the effectiveness with which schools promote equality of opportunity and tackle discrimination, how effectively they promote children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, as well as increase pupils' positive contribution to the community are a welcome and useful development. We hope that Ofsted will continue to assess schools on these or similar criteria.

In light of our concerns about those who would mitigate against social cohesion in our schools, we consider the Government's plan to 'release outstanding schools from all routine inspection' (section 6.3) to be very ill-advised, especially as the Government is also fast tracking bids from these schools to become new academy schools, and as the Free School programme will allow untried and untested education providers to start running state funded schools.

School Admissions

We are very concerned by the level of non compliance with the Admissions Code by schools and especially faith schools that control their own pupil admissions. The Chief Schools Adjudicator, Dr Ian Craig, highlighted the particular problems with faith schools in his 2010 annual report², which was published last month. In it he noted that "the main area of non-compliance [for primary schools that are their own admissions authority] regards clarity about how an admission authority will objectively ascertain whether a child meets faith related admissions criteria". He also noted that the "main issues in relation to secondary OAs [secondary schools that are their own admissions authority included] ... complex, points based oversubscription criteria, usually in 'faith' schools, that are not directly related to religious observance or practice and/or unlikely to be easily understood by parents".

It is clear to us that the School Admissions Code needs to provide greater instruction and clarity with regards to faith related admissions criteria, and that this is particularly pressing due to the current expansion of new academy schools, which will become their own admissions authority. We hope that the Government will not overlook adding this much needed clarity in its desire to simplify the Code (section 5.35).

We are disappointed the Government propose to end the requirement for local authorities responsible for education to submit annual reports to the schools adjudicator (section 5.34), as this was introduced specifically to help tackle the problem of schools breaching the Admissions Code.

Religious Education

¹ Bald J, Harber A, Robinson N and Schiff E (2010) *Faith Schools We Can Believe In: Ensuring that tolerant and democratic values are upheld in every part of Britain's education system*, Policy Exchange, http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/assets/PX_Faith_Schools.pdf.02/12/10. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

² Craig, I (2010) *Office of the Schools Adjudicator Annual report 2010*, Office of the Schools Adjudicator, http://www.schoolsadjudicator.gov.uk/RMS_upload/Annual%20Report%202009-103.pdf. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

We believe that children should receive a core entitlement to a non-instructional RE that teaches them about the broad range of beliefs in our increasingly diverse society, and so do a majority of the public. In 2009 we commissioned YouGov poll, which found that 75% of people agreed or strongly agreed that “all state funded schools should teach an objective and balanced syllabus for education about a wide range of religious and non-religious beliefs”, with only 8% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing³.

We believe the Government shares this vision and know that the Liberal Democrats do. The Liberal Democrat’s policy paper *Equality and Excellence: Policies to Improve 5-19 Education in English Schools and Colleges*⁴ was published and adopted in spring 2009 and the Party reaffirmed its commitment to the paper at its autumn conference this September. The paper noted in section 3.1 that:

“We would set down broad guidance on religious education at a national level and ensure that religious education in state funded schools educates young people about people’s beliefs and practise in terms of the main religious belief systems. It should not specify what pupils themselves should believe and practise. However, faith schools would still be free to offer their pupils [additional] religious instruction”.

We endorse this policy put forward by one of the Government partners and believe that broad guidance on RE at a national level would be best provided by making RE part of the National Curriculum.

We are very concerned that the current arrangements for RE allow most faith schools to provide RE that can be overtly instructional and not teach about the broad range of beliefs in society, while the RE taught in other state schools can be of variable quality. In June of this year Ofsted published its report *Transforming religious education*⁵, which found that there was “very significant variability in the quantity and quality of support for RE provided to schools by local authorities”, that the standards of RE provision in secondary schools had fallen since 2007 and recommended that the Department for Education should review the current local arrangements for RE in England.

We believe that making a flexible RE syllabus part of the National Curriculum would deal help to deal with these problems and would be a relatively straight forward measure, as the 2004 *The non-statutory national framework for religious education*⁶ already provides a popular and widely accepted template for the Government to work from. The framework offers guidance on the provision of RE in England and recommended that RE should have an educational and inclusive approach. The framework was produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency for the then Secretary of State of Education, with the support of the main RE professional organisations and most of the country’s main religion and belief groups, including the Church of England, Catholic Education Service, Muslim Council of Britain and Board of Deputies of British Jews. We are very pleased that the study of RE has grown in popularity since the framework has taken

³ YouGov polled a weighted and representative sample of 2114 adults in Great Britain. The detailed poll results can be found at <http://today.yougov.co.uk/sites/today.yougov.co.uk/files/YG-Archives-lif-agree-faithschools-090624.pdf>. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

⁴ *Equality and Excellence: Policies to Improve 5-19 Education in English Schools and Colleges* can be found at <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Lib-Dem-89 - Equity and Excellence.pdf>. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

⁵ *Transforming religious education* can be found at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/Transforming-religious-education>. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

⁶ Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (2004) *The non-statutory national framework for religious education*, <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/NSNF-for-RE-2004.pdf>. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

effect and believe the Government could simply make the guidance statutory for state maintained schools.

The white paper did not mention RE and we hope that the Government does not miss the rare opportunity provided by its curriculum review to reform and improve upon the current variable provision of RE in England.

Collective Worship

We note with interest that the Government set out in section 16 of the white paper that one of its aims for the new school system is to 'increase freedom and autonomy for all schools, removing unnecessary duties and burdens, and allowing all schools to choose for themselves how best to develop'. We believe that in the Government's commitment to reduce bureaucracy and unnecessary obligations on schools and teachers, that it should also repeal the current law on Collective Worship.

The Accord Coalition thinks that assemblies provide schools with a very important opportunity to consider ethical and moral questions, as well as investigate and forge shared values. However, the law currently requires all schools to provide daily Collective Worship for all their pupils of a 'broadly Christian' character. It is apparent that the law on Collective Worship is very unpopular with schools and widely flouted and ignored by a great many of them as a consequence, which is very unhealthy in a democracy. Ofsted's *2002-03 annual report – secondary education*⁷ stated for example that four fifths of secondary schools do not hold a daily act of collective worship for all pupils.

By repealing the law on Collective Worship the Government will allow schools to develop their own approach to assemblies, and by allowing schools to operate in a more workable legal framework more of them should then choose to provide assemblies. We recommend that when the law on Collective Worship is eventually repealed that the Government should produce guidelines for all state funded schools to provide assemblies that focus on shared values between different religious and non-religious worldviews.

Not only would repealing the law on Collective Worship be ideologically coherent with the Government's education reform agenda, but it would also be popular, and not just with teachers, but with the wider public too. The Accord Coalition commissioned a YouGov poll⁸ in the July of this year asked the public if they supported or opposed replacing the laws on collective worship with a requirement that schools, including faith schools, should instead hold assemblies which consider spiritual, moral and ethical issues shared by different religions, as well as by those that are not religious. The proposal was supported by 43% and opposed by 30%. We also note with interest that scrapping the law on collective worship quickly became one of the most popular suggestions on the "Your Freedom" website, which the Government launched in July of this year to ask the public to nominate those laws they thought should be repealed.

We believe that the current law on Collective Worship infringes children's right to freedom of belief, as set out in the European Convention of Human Rights, by forcing pupils to take part in worship regardless of what they personally believe. The Liberal Democrats are the only one of the two coalition partners to have formal policy on Collective Worship and we note with interest that section 4.7.7 of their policy paper *Equality and Excellence: Policies to Improve 5-19 Education in English*

⁷ Ofsted's *2002-03 annual report – secondary education* can be found at [http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/content/download/2233/14298/file/Annual%20Report%202002-03%20-%20secondary%20education%20\(Word%20format\).doc](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/content/download/2233/14298/file/Annual%20Report%202002-03%20-%20secondary%20education%20(Word%20format).doc). Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

⁸ YouGov polled a weighted and representative of 2114 adults in Great Britain. More details on the poll can be found at <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/2010/11/19/michael-gove-under-pressure-to-end-compulsory-worship-in-schools/>.

Schools and Colleges states that “Liberal Democrats would ... require schools who choose to hold assemblies to ensure that any act of collective worship is optional for pupils who are old enough to decide for themselves and otherwise for parents”.

The Liberal Democrats clearly believe that the law needs to be changed so that Collective Worship is optional for schools, rather than mandatory, and so that greater recognition of children’s rights is made. We hope this thinking by the Liberal Democrat finds its way into the forthcoming education Bill.

Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education

We were disappointed that the white paper did not make reference to making PSHE part of the National Curriculum. PSHE aims to help children and young people deal with the real life issues they face as they grow up and we believe that all schools at primary and secondary level should provide it. However, we are dismayed that the Government has already indicated that it does not intend to include the Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) aspect of PSHE in the revised National Curriculum, as was confirmed by the Minister of State for Schools Nick Gibb MP in his response to a written question⁹ from Annette Brooke MP on November 29th.

Making PSHE part of the National Curriculum could be relatively straight forward. For example the existing non-statutory programmes of PSHE study for Key Stage 3 and 4 produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency could simply be made statutory. We struggle to understand why the Government would not want to require all schools that follow the National Curriculum to provide high standard age appropriate SRE, when it is known that it reduces unwanted pregnancies, the spread of sexually transmitted infections and gives children tools to be clear about personal boundaries, resist pressure, seek help when they need it and to challenge misleading and inappropriate messages in the media.

The UK has growing rates of sexually transmitted infections, as figures¹⁰ released by the Health Protection Agency in August revealed, and the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Western Europe. Current SRE provision in the UK lags behind that of many developed countries and a 2007 survey¹¹ by the UK Youth parliament of over 20,000 young people found that shockingly 61 per cent of boys and 70 per cent of girls aged over 17 reported not receiving any information at school about personal relationships.

There is widespread support for making SRE part of the National Curriculum among educationalists, parliamentarians, religion and belief groups, health organisations, as well as also among parents, schools and young people.

Both the Catholic Education Service of England and Wales and the Church of England supported that the inclusion of SRE in the National Curriculum at both primary and secondary levels during passage of the Children, Schools and Families Act 2010.

⁹ The Minister of State for Schools written answer can be found at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm101130/text/101130w0004.htm#10113068002992>. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

¹⁰ The Health Protection Agency’s latest statistics can be found at <http://www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/STIs/STIsAnnualData/>. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

¹¹ The UK Youth Parliament’s survey results report can be found in its report *Are you getting it?* at <http://www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk/campaigns/sre/AreYouGettingIt.pdf>. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

Meanwhile the report *Sex and Relationship Education: Views from teachers, parents and governors*¹², released in October of this year and commissioned by the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations, the National Association of Head Teachers, the National Governors Association and Durex, found that 90% of parents and 93% of Governors thought schools should be involved in providing SRE. Furthermore, it found that more than one in four school leaders and a fifth of governors believe that the current provision of SRE in schools was failing children by preparing them for the future 'not well' or 'not at all well'.

It is apparent that the continued failure to ensure that all schools provide thorough, accurate and balanced SRE undermines the future health and wellbeing of our children. We urge the Government to explain why it does not intend to make SRE part of the National Curriculum, or to reconsider excluding it from the forthcoming review.

Citizenship

The Accord Coalition supports Citizenship education. We believe it helps children and young people to become more responsible citizens, who make a more positive contribution to society. However, we note that in section 4.7 the paper states that the National Curriculum '... must not become a vehicle for imposing passing political fads on our children'. While we agree with the sentiment, we are aware that Citizenship was only added to the National Curriculum at the secondary level in 2002 and so hope the paper did not mean to include Citizenship in this reference.

Although pupils can take Citizenship Studies as a GCSE in some schools, most Citizenship education does not lead to a qualification. We are concerned that if Citizenship's place in the National Curriculum is weakened that many schools will choose to reduce their provision of it and instead focus more of their and their pupil's efforts towards subjects that do lead to a qualification and thus which are more likely to improve the school's standing in league tables. Consequently it is vital that Citizenship's place in a new National Curriculum is protected.

Conclusion

It is admirable that the Government is so concerned with the education of our children that it has made its plans for education such a high priority, having already introduced one education Act and by proposing to introduce a second and wide ranging education Bill within such a short period of time since its formation.

However, we are very concerned by the current direction of travel. We believe that as the Government give schools greater freedom it should also ensure greater rather than less monitoring to make certain that those new freedoms are not abused. As set out above, we believe that the Schools Admissions Code must be changed as to provide greater clarity about faith based admissions criteria and that Ofsted should have a greater role in assessing school's compliance with their community cohesion duty. The Government must not allow schools to become even more ghettoised on religious grounds.

We are worried that during a period of such wide ranging reform that the Government appears to be only consulting with organisations that are in favour of schools and particularly faith schools

¹² *Sex and Relationship Education: Views from teachers, parents and governors* can be found at <http://www.nga.org.uk/uploadfiles/SRE%20Education%20Views%20from%20teachers%20parents%20and%20governors.pdf>. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

operating in narrow and discriminatory ways, as was revealed by the Minister of State for Schools Nick Gibb MP in his recent parliamentary written answer¹³ to Julian Huppert MP, which set out groups that Department for Education Ministers had met with since May 12th. We regret that no Department for Education Ministers has yet arranged to meet with us, despite our five formal requests to do so, and that the team for the forthcoming education Bill has not responded to our request to meet with them either.

Regardless of any differences, we believe that talking with us will only help the Government in its decision making. For example it is apparent that the Government had not realised before the Academies Act was enacted into law that it would lead to most voluntary controlled schools with a religious character that become a new academy school having far greater power to discriminate on religious grounds in both their pupil admissions and the recruitment and employment of their teachers.

Had the Government agreed to meet with us, or indeed taken on board the correspondence of our supporters, then they would have learnt of this unintended consequence of the Act while it was still in a position to amend it. They would also have avoided the embarrassment of a Minister misrepresenting the Government's programme in public, as the Deputy Prime Minister The Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP did in his speech to his Party's autumn conference, when he said:

"But there's one freedom new schools shouldn't have. Freedom to select. The whole concept of our reforms falls apart if you use it to expand selection ... no to more selection."¹⁴

Clearly the Academies Act does allow for a significant *increase* in pupil selection in the state sector on the grounds of religion.

As the Liberal Democrats have also set out, we too believe that the law on RE and Collective Worship needs to be reformed and hope that the forthcoming education Bill will take into account the Liberal Democrats strong and considered policy in these areas. We also urge the Government to retain Citizenship education's standing in the new National Curriculum and implore it to also include PSHE throughout Key Stages 1 to 4 on behalf of our children's future health and wellbeing.

About the Accord Coalition

The Accord Coalition was launched in September 2008 and brings together a wide range of religious and non religious organisations campaigning for an end to religious discrimination in school staffing and pupil admissions. The Coalition also campaigns for a fair and balanced Religious Education (RE) curriculum, for pupils to receive Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education, and the removal of the requirement for compulsory daily Collective Worship. It does not take a position for or against sectarian schools in principle.

Its growing list of members and supporters include the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the British Humanist Association, the Christian think tank Ekklesia, the British Muslims for Secular Democracy, The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches and members from the four largest groupings in parliament.

¹³ The Minister of State for Schools written answer can be found at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm101115/text/101115w0003.htm#10111522000008>. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.

¹⁴ A transcript of the Deputy Prime Minister's speech can be found at http://www.libdems.org.uk/latest_news_detail.aspx?title=Nick_Clegg%E2%80%99s_speech_to_Autumn_Conference_&pK=89ecdad2-048d-4910-bc5f-0ef443e9b0bf. Last accessed December 7th, 2010.