

# Submission to the Education Bill Committee from the Accord Coalition

## About the Accord Coalition

The Accord Coalition is a campaign coalition, launched in 2008, which brings together a wide range of organisations, both religious and non-religious, that are concerned that restrictive legislation around admissions, employment and the curriculum in state funded faith schools can serve to undermine community cohesion and not adequately prepare children for life in our increasingly diverse society.

Accord's growing list of members and supporters includes 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, the race equality think tank The Runnymede Trust and members from the four largest groupings in parliament.

Accord wants all state funded schools to be open and suitable to all children of every background, no matter what their parents' or their own beliefs. We would like classrooms to be as diverse as the local area from which the school draws its pupils, as we believe that mutual understanding will best grow through a shared civic life, and because we view mutual understanding as vital to the future wellbeing and happiness of society.

Accord is very worried that rather than acting as engine rooms of cohesiveness, through legislative freedoms, some schools can instead help to create environments where mistrust between groups can more readily grow, such as through providing a narrow curriculum about the beliefs of others, and by segregating children and teachers on the grounds of religion. We note that segregation on the grounds of religion can also lead to segregation on the grounds of race and ethnicity too.

It is with these concerns that we approach the Education Bill. We are happy to provide further detail and evidence on request and would be delighted to give oral evidence to the Committee.

## Overview

1. Accord regrets that the Bill does not actively seek to ensure that schools operate in more inclusive ways. This could be achieved through removing exemptions from equality and human rights legislation that allow faith schools to discriminate on the grounds of religion in teacher employment and pupil admissions; making RE a nationally determined subject to ensure that the provision of RE in schools is academic, rather than instructional, and of a high standard; removing the requirement for daily Collective Worship and providing guidance for schools to provide inclusive assemblies that focus on shared values.

2. However, we believe that in the Government's eagerness to reduce bureaucracy and give schools greater freedom and autonomy, the Bill proposes to take away very important safeguards that help ensure better community cohesion and prevent schools from operating in even more discriminatory ways.

Accord's biggest concerns in relation to the Bill are as follows:

- the removal of Ofsted's duty to inspect how schools promote community cohesion
- less scrutiny of admissions practices by removing the responsibility of local authorities to establish an admission forum, and by taking away the freedom of the school adjudicator to consider and propose changes to any part of a school's admissions arrangements

3. We do not believe that the Government means to appear complacent about school arrangements which, in practice, undermine social cohesion and we urge the Committee to amend the Bill to retain the above protections.

## Clause 40 - Removal of duty for Ofsted to inspect community cohesion

4. The 2006 Education and Inspections Act introduced a duty upon all maintained schools in England to promote community cohesion and on Ofsted, to report on the contributions made in this area when undertaking a Section 5 school inspection. The duty on schools came into effect in September 2007 and the duty on Ofsted in September 2008. Clause 40 proposes to remove Ofsted's duty to inspect community cohesion in schools entirely.

5. Accord believes that the current inspection regime on community cohesion risks appearing cursory, as Ofsted does not yet look at factors such as how a school's admissions and teacher employment policy and the kind of RE, Collective Worship and Citizenship it provides impact upon its contribution towards community cohesion.

6. We believe the scope of Ofsted's inspection regime on community cohesion should be made much wider. This would make the inspection of schools' adherence to their community cohesion duty far more meaningful, represent a better use of inspectors' time and produce information that is of far greater benefit to parents, local communities and government.

7. If parliament removes Ofsted's recently introduced duty to inspect cohesion then they will take away the principal means of ensuring that schools actually do try to promote cohesion, thereby making schools' cohesion duty almost meaningless.

8. Evidence in recent years has repeatedly given cause for concern about the way that many schools, and very often schools with a religious character, operate in narrow and exclusive ways, and the negative consequences that this has for wider society.

9. The Cattle Report<sup>1</sup> was commissioned by the Home Office and published in 2001 after the riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley that year. The report noted how riots had not arisen in diverse areas, such as Southall and Leicester, where pupils learnt about different religions and cultures in local schools. The report also recommended that 'admissions policies should avoid more than 75% of pupils from one culture or ethnic background in multi-cultural areas' and that faith schools should offer 'at least 25% of places to other faiths or denominations' (p 37). Sadly neither recommendation was taken up.

10. The 'Oldham Independent Review Report 2001'<sup>2</sup>, which was commissioned by Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council and Greater Manchester Police, and academic reports, such as 'Social Capital, Diversity and Education Policy'<sup>3</sup> (2006) and 'Identities in Transition: A Longitudinal Study of Immigrant Children'<sup>4</sup> (2008) have all reaffirmed the positive effect that mixed schooling has upon the social relations and growth of mutual understanding between those from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

11. Meanwhile, the report from the centre right think tank Policy Exchange released last November *Faith Schools We Can Believe In*<sup>5</sup> maintained that schools were increasingly vulnerable to extremist influences

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<sup>1</sup> Cattle, T (2001) *Community Cohesion: A Report by the Independent Review Team*

<http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2001/12/11/communitycohesionreport.pdf>

Last accessed February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Oldham Independent Review Report 2001 can be found at <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2001/12/11/Oldhamindependentreview.pdf>. Last accessed February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Bruegel, I (2006) *Social Capital, Diversity and Education Policy*

<http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/publications/SCDiversityEdu28.8.06.pdf>

Last accessed February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Brown R, Rutland A & Watters C (2008) *Identities in Transition: A Longitudinal Study of Immigrant Children*

<http://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Identities-in-Transition.-A-Longitudinal-Study-of-Immigrant-Children.pdf>

Last accessed February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011

<sup>5</sup> 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,

that promote a divisive and exclusivist ideology and argued that the Department for Education, Ofsted, independent inspectorates, education authorities and schools were not equipped to meet such challenges.

12. Ofsted's community cohesion duty is a significant measure introduced to address widespread public concern about how policies pursued by some schools, and particularly faith schools, undermined social cohesion. If parliament were to remove Ofsted's recently introduced cohesion duty they would be backtracking on a vital obligation.

13. Public concern and media interest about problems surrounding community cohesion have not abated since Ofsted's duty was brought into effect. Accord believes that by removing the primary means of ensuring that schools try to foster better community cohesion, that both parliament and the Government will open themselves up to accusations of being complacent about this issue in future.

14. We believe that in the Government's eagerness to remove bureaucracy it has made a political miscalculation and urge the Committee to rectify this oversight.

**Clause 34 – Removal of the responsibility on local authorities responsible for education to establish an admission forum, and the freedom of the schools adjudicator to consider and propose changes to any part of a school's admissions arrangements.**

15. Accord is very disappointed that clause 34 will take away the responsibility of local authorities to establish an admission forum, because school admission forums help to ensure that admission policies in a local area are fair, do not cause other admission authorities undue problems and that they adhere to the School Admissions Code.

16. Successive annual reports of the Chief Schools' Adjudicator have shown a particular problem with the admission policies at schools that are their own admissions authority. We therefore believe that the school adjudicator should retain the freedom to consider and propose changes to any part of a school's admissions arrangements, and that this is especially important now that the Government has announced that it is to make the School Admissions Code less prescriptive, and because it is creating many more Academy schools, which will act as their own admissions authority.

17. As the Government gives schools greater freedom and allows new and untested education providers to start running state funded schools through its Academies and free schools programme, it follows that it should also ensure (at the very least) the same level of monitoring of schools, not less, to help make certain that those new freedoms are not abused. As it stands, the Bill currently risks the promulgation of practice and policy at individual school levels which undermine social cohesion in our schools.

For more details, information and evidence, contact the Accord Coalition:

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