



Accord Coalition Quarterly Report No. 12 December 2011

The last eighteen months has been a time of extraordinary change in the world of education, seeing both the introduction of the English Baccalaureate and an explosion in the number of Academy schools.

These include new 'converter' Academies, where better achieving schools can simply convert to becoming an Academy (under Labour failing schools were taken over by an outside organisation), as well as Free Schools. Although legally Free Schools are just another type of Academy, they provide an opportunity for new and untested education providers to join the state funded system.

In a time of such change it could be easy to get swept away in the general rush. However, while Accord is adapting to these changes in the educational landscape, it remains focused on its core aims for inclusive education, which include ensuring schools:

- provide a broad curriculum that prepares children for life in our increasingly diverse society
- are free from religious discrimination in admissions and staff employment
- are transparent and open to inspection
- are made suitable for all children, regardless of their or their family's religion or beliefs

WHAT'S GOOD FOR NORTHERN IRELAND...

...MIGHT BE GOOD FOR THE REST OF THE UK TOO

When the First Minister of Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson, made a speech last week to the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) conference in County Derry, he called for Protestant and Catholic children in Northern Ireland to attend the same schools and thereby end the 'them and us' culture.

Accord strongly believes that the experiences in Northern Ireland should offer lessons for the rest of the UK as well. Faith schools did not create the sectarian problems there, but do help maintain stereotypes and create an environment where mistrust can readily grow, helping to perpetuate the social divide.

Perhaps we should take heed and, rather than increase the number of faith schools – which effectively segregate children of different religions – we should instead have an integrated

educational system in which those of all faiths and none attend together, learn about each other and mix socially every day.

We do not want our wonderfully multi-faith society to become multi-fractious, nor for children in the next generation to grow up as strangers to each other.

BREAKING NEW GROUND

1. THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

The main thrust of the Accord Coalition until now has been directly influencing politicians so as to change and implement legislation to improve the state funded schools. Having found friends in all the main political groupings in parliament, we are now turning our attention to forge contacts with those who share our aims within other influential groups, including those organisations that sponsor, own and run faith schools.

In February Accord will be attending the Church's General Synod meeting for the first time. We plan to have a display stand and organise a fringe meeting, with the hope of finding even more people within the Church who support our aims.

2. TEACHERS

While one third of state funded schools in England and Wales are faith schools, teachers are at the forefront of all our schools.

A great many in the profession want all state funded schools to have a broad and inclusive curriculum, and for the arrangements that allow faith schools to discriminate on religious grounds in their pupil admissions and staff employment to end.

In April we shall therefore be attending and speaking at the annual conferences of both the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT).

If you will be attending either of these conferences or the General Synod meeting please let us know.

3. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION COUNCIL

The Accord Coalition has just applied for membership of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC).

The REC was established in 1973 to represent the collective interests of a wide variety of professional associations and religion and belief groups in deepening and strengthening provision for Religious Education (RE). It provides a multi-faith forum where national organisations with an

interest in supporting and promoting RE in schools and colleges can share matters of common concern.

The REC wants schools to teach RE that is both broad and non-instructional, including the teaching non-religious perspectives. We hope that by joining the REC Accord can strengthen the voice of those who want to maintain and press for even more inclusive approaches to the subject.

EDUCATION BILL TRIUMPH AND FAILURE

As the Education Bill progressed through the Houses of Parliament this summer, Accord received growing support for its attempt to amend the Bill so that OFSTED would continue to inspect how schools promoted community cohesion.

Accord felt that taking away OFSTED's duty, as the Bill proposed, would be a retrograde step that would give a clear signal to schools that community cohesion was no longer a priority. At a time of great religious and racial diversity in Britain, the exact opposite should be the case. As we argued in a [briefing to Peers](#) in early October, schools should be one of the engines of social change that promote good inter-communal relations, both through their policies and their curriculum.

When the Bill reached its Report Stage in the House of Lords Accord supporter, Baroness Flather of Windsor and Maidenhead, tabled an amendment – that was then debated - to put community cohesion back on the list of items OFSTED would be required to inspect in schools.

Despite support from both Government and Opposition benches, the Government opposed the amendments and it was defeated by 181 votes to 141. It was deeply disappointing that the amendment lost so narrowly (by 40 votes out of 322).

However, there were positives. The debate over the amendment enjoyed contributions from a wide number of Peers and the Government was forced to defend its actions. It was reassuring that the amendment drew support not only from Peers belonging to all the main political groupings, but from prominent religious and secular figures as well, including the Lord Bishop of Ripon and Leeds, who argued during the debate that:

'If we are to continue to affirm and assert the need for social cohesion within our country, it is crucial for schools to be included. People from different backgrounds with different abilities and perspectives need to work together in order to have a cohesive society'.

The Education Act has now been enacted into law, but it is apparent that there is a large and growing constituency of parliamentarians concerned about how schools can serve to create social division, rather than advance community cohesion.

LOCAL CAMPAIGNS

At the beginning of November the Accord Coalition [launched](#) a local campaign initiative to stop religious discrimination in the pupil admissions of voluntary controlled (VC) faith schools. VC faith schools comprise over a third of the state funded faith schools in England and Wales and, unbeknown to many, have their admission policy controlled by their local council.

A large minority of Councils still allow their VC schools to select pupils on religious grounds and consequently the opportunity exists for local residents in these areas to urge and lobby their local authority to ensure these schools' admission arrangements are made inclusive and open to all children. For more information on this campaign please see <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/campaigning-for-inclusive-admissions-in-local-voluntary-controlled-faith-schools/>.

Coordinated local campaigns can prove highly effective and we were pleased at the end October when a local campaign to retain the number of pupil places at inclusive schools on the Isle of Wight that Accord endorsed [succeeded](#).

Local parent, Jeremy Cangialosi, who helped run the local campaign told his local paper, 'I don't think our confidence would have held up so well without all the support and advice we got from the BHA, the Accord Coalition and all the other members and individuals who stood up for the campaign – thank you.'

PORTFOLIO OF TESTIMONIES OF FAITH SCHOOL DISCRIMINATION

Yesterday the Accord Coalition published a [new resource of personal testimonies and media reports](#) which highlight a wide variety of discriminatory practices employed by state schools

Back in July Accord [launched](#) a 46 page databank of contemporary evidence and research by independent academic sources about the implications of current policy on state funded faith schools and their practices.

The [new portfolio](#) now compliments the databank by providing real life examples of overt discrimination and unnecessary practices by schools that fail to properly respect the religious or non-religious beliefs of children, their families or staff. Examples highlighted include:

- a child living 100 yards from a faith school being refused entry due to being of the wrong denomination
- Unitarians self-defining as Christian being denied a place at a Church of England school because the school did not consider Unitarians to be Christians
- a head teacher being forced to leave a Catholic school because the school considered his remarriage to be against its religious tenets
- a school teaching its pupils that gay people should be celibate

The portfolio makes for disturbing reading and emphasizes the pressing need for changes in how our state funded schools operate. We extend our thanks to those supporters who have allowed us to use their testimonies.

Public debate over faith schools so often suffers from people arguing from fixed ideological positions, and we hope that both the databank and new portfolio of testimonies and news stories will help give the debate greater focus.

WHAT'S NEXT

The New Year will start with a burst of activity. In January Accord will be meeting with the new Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Stephen Twigg MP, while the New Statesman is due to publish a feature on the Accord Coalition's viewpoint on state funded schools.

Meanwhile, in February we will also be announcing the result of the 2012 Inclusive Schools Award, which highlights and rewards those schools that do most to be inclusive of others and promote the growth of mutual understanding.

Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain MBE
Chair, Accord Coalition