

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Thursday, 05 January 2012

Dear Mr Gove,

I am writing to you as Chair of the Accord Coalition, which unites a wide range of religious and secular groups campaigning for inclusive education.

Our member groups and supporters include the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the British Humanist Association, the British Muslims for Secular Democracy, the Christian think tank Ekklesia and the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, as well as members from the four largest groupings in parliament.

We have been deeply concerned to read a report¹ in the Friday December 23rd edition of the Times Educational Supplement that the Department for Education is in discussions about how '*... the process for community schools wishing to become CofE faith academies can be made quicker and easier*'.

My organisation wants state funded schools to be open to all and be appropriate for all children, regardless of their or their family's beliefs. We are however very concerned that the Department may be proposing to make it easier for more Academy faith schools to open.

As you will know Academy schools with a religious character are able to select (or as we view it, discriminate) on the grounds of religion in their pupil admissions policy and in the recruitment and employment of teachers. They are also free to teach what they wish in Religious Education and have no requirement to teach about the range of beliefs that are held in society.

We are deeply concerned about how schools like this can serve to increase ethnic and religious segregation, undermine community cohesion and not adequately prepare children for life in our increasingly diverse country, and as such we are very worried that the Department is proposing to make changes that will allow more schools like this to become established.

¹ *An answer from above?*, Times Educational Supplement, 23/12/11. Available at <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6158763>. Last accessed 05/01/12.



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We would further add that faith schools do not need to select their pupils and teachers on the grounds of religion, or control what they teach in RE in order to achieve high standards or maintain their ethos, as a great many voluntary controlled faith schools already help demonstrate.

Could you therefore firstly confirm if the article in the TES is accurate, and if the Department is looking to make the process for community schools wishing to become Church of England faith Academies quicker and easier?

Secondly, if the article is correct, can you tell us what measures the Department intends to put in place to ensure that such consultations are thorough and responsive to local feeling?

You will be aware that if a maintained school wishes to become a faith school then it currently needs to close and then reopen as a new school to facilitate this. In contrast the consultation required by the Academies Act 2010 when a maintained school proposes to convert to become an Academy is far less prescriptive than for example the consultation required when a local authority wishes to open a new state funded school or close an existing maintained school.

Thirdly, can you tell us what safeguards the Department intends to put in place to prevent religious selection in pupil admissions and staff employment in these schools, as well as ensure that they teach about a broad range of religion and beliefs, as the currently locally determined system for producing Religion Education syllabuses generally ensures?

The Accord Coalition are experts in the field of inclusive education on the grounds of religion, and if we can provide you or any of your colleagues with further information or be of assistance in any way about the issues raised in this letter, or indeed at any point in future, then I hope you will not hesitate to contact me.

I will look forward to receiving a reply to my questions above in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain MBE
Chair of the Accord Coalition