



School Organisation Code: A submission from the Accord Coalition

The Accord Coalition recommends that a new bullet point be added to section 1.6 of the draft code, advising relevant bodies that they should consider the impact proposals will have upon community cohesion. Accord believes this very important, due to the profound contribution, both positive and negative, that schools can make towards the cohesiveness of society.

Not only does Accord believe requiring bodies to consider the impact of proposals upon community in this way would add greater rigour to the school reorganisation process and further incentivise those putting forward proposals to show greater attention to their impact upon social cohesion, but it also would also place those in authority who are interested in how school's ethos and policies contribute towards cohesion on a much surer footing to act upon their concerns.

The contribution individual schools can make towards community cohesion

A school may attempt to pro-actively improve the contribution it makes towards better community cohesion through a variety of means such as through its citizenship education, personal and social education, and by having exchanges with different schools. However, two of the ways frequently considered among the most important issues around schools and community cohesion are the admission policy schools adhere to, and the formal education they provide about the range of beliefs and values in society.

The curriculum

All state schools in Wales have to teach the National Curriculum, but the two branches of learning where schools have the greatest opportunities to promote the growth of mutual understanding and foster shared values - Religious Education (RE) and school assembly - are exempt from the Curriculum.

Most schools teach RE according to a syllabus drawn up by their local authority, while most schools with a religious character (faith schools) are free to determine what they teach in the subject. Local syllabus RE is generally broad, balanced and genuinely educational, and this is sometimes true of the RE provided at faith schools that determine their own RE provision.

However, many faith schools do not provide a broad education about religions and philosophical beliefs different from that of the school, and their RE can be overtly instructional. In addition, some Community schools could do more to be respectful of the beliefs of some religious pupils, and many could use the flexibility they enjoy, such as in RE, to promote the growth of mutual understanding more creatively and in ways better suited to their local setting. Meanwhile, schools, and often faith schools, reinforce a narrow or sectarian education through the nature of the Collective Worship they provide in school assembly.

Admissions

The horizons of pupils can also be narrowed by religious, ethnic and racial segregation between schools. Not only does such segregation limit children and young people's personal interaction with those from different backgrounds, but over time, schools can become more inward looking and less attune to the diversity and desires of the wider local community, as they focus on the immediate needs of their student body.

Faith selection in admissions is not always an exacerbating feature in segregation between local schools. However, it often is as most (though not all) faith schools can and do show preference to children in admissions on faith grounds when oversubscribed, and as faith selection can serve as a proxy for selection by ethnicity and race too. Such practice can also have a negative knock on effect on other nearby schools, even those which embrace a community ethos, as once one school has a more segregated pupil intake, so the profile of their neighbours will automatically become less diverse. Meanwhile, schools may also become further ghettoised if they employ teachers with the same belief background as the school – most faith schools can ensure that all of their teachers share its faith.

Whereas experience in some parts of Scotland and Northern Ireland in particular (where over 95% of pupils are educated in Catholic or notionally Protestant schools) speak strongly against helping facilitate greater religious segregation in a school system, evidence in recent years has shown the strong contribution that schools with mixed intakes can have at creating communities more at ease with itself.

Among the key findings of 'Social Capital, Diversity and Education Policy'¹, by Professor Irene Bruegel of the London South Bank University Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group (2006) were that "Friendship at primary schools can, and does, cross ethnic and faith divides wherever children have the opportunity to make friends from different backgrounds. At that age, in such schools, children are not highly conscious of racial differences and are largely unaware of the religion of their friends ... There was some evidence that parents learned to respect people from other backgrounds as a result of their children's experiences in mixed schools." (p2)

'Identities in Transition: A Longitudinal Study of Immigrant Children'², by Rupert Brown, Adam Rutland & Charles Watters from the Universities of Sussex and Kent (2008) found that "... the effects of school diversity were consistent, most evidently on social relations: higher self-esteem, fewer peer problems and more cross-group friendships. Such findings show that school ethnic composition can significantly affect the promotion of positive intergroup attitudes. These findings speak against policies promoting single faith schools, since such policies are likely to lead to reduced ethnic diversity in schools." (p9)

Meanwhile, the 2001 'Oldham Independent Review'³, which was commissioned by the UK Government, Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council and the local police authority after race riots in the town that year found that "Educational mixing: This is closely linked to residential, and in our view it is desirable in principle that as many schools as possible, should have mixed intake so that children growing up can learn one another's customs and cultural backgrounds and accept that stereotypes and racism are unacceptable" (p7). The report also 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.

¹ Bruegel, I (2006) *Social Capital, Diversity and Education Policy*. London South Bank University Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group. Available at <http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/publications/SCDiversityEdu28.8.06.pdf>. Last accessed 01/2013.

² Brown, R, Rutland, A and Charles Watters (2008) *Identities in Transition: A Longitudinal Study of Immigrant Children*. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL. Available at <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Identities-in-Transition.-A-Longitudinal-Study-of-Immigrant-Children.pdf>. Last accessed 01/2013.

³ Ritchie, D (2001) *Oldham Independent Review*. Available at <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2001/12/11/Oldhamindependentreview.pdf>. Last accessed 01/2013.

Conclusion

Accord welcomes that the draft code lists the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as one of the overarching principles that relevant bodies should take into account when developing school reorganisation proposals, and we urge that this is retained in the published version. By listing the Convention in this way, the code already gives relevant bodies some scope (which we hope they will use) to consider how proposals will ensure that children receive a broad and balanced education, which promotes the growth of mutual understanding. For example, Article 29 of the convention states that:

'State Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to ... the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;'

However, we urge that a new bullet point be added to section 1.6 of the draft code, which requires relevant bodies involved in deciding the outcome of a proposed school reorganisation to consider the impact upon community cohesion. This would remove ambiguity, require that all parties take community cohesion seriously, and ensure relevant bodies evaluate the impact of a school or proposed school's policies and ethos.

In so doing, this amendment would complement the Welsh Government's existing commitment to improve community cohesion, as expressed in its cohesion strategy *Getting On Together*⁴, and ensure that rather than creating or sustaining fragmentation, that over the long term, schools in Wales act as engine rooms for respect, trust and cohesiveness in society.

If you have any queries please contact the Accord Coalition:

Paul Pettinger
1 Gower Street, London, WC1E 6HD.
020 7462 4990
paul@accordcoalition.org.uk
<http://accordcoalition.org.uk/>

About the Accord Coalition

The Accord Coalition is a campaign coalition, launched in 2008, which brings together a wide range of organisations in England and Wales, 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 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 the race equality think tank The Runnymede Trust.

Accord wants all state funded schools in England and Wales 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 view mutual understanding as vital to the future wellbeing and happiness of society and believe it will best flourish through a shared civic life.

⁴ Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *Getting On Together - a Community Cohesion Strategy for Wales*. Available at <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dsijg/publications/commsafety/091130ccstratenv1.pdf>. Last accessed 01/2013.