

A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools

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<http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/A-New-Settlement-for-Religion-and-Belief-in-schools.pdf>

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We began this pamphlet by suggesting that, seven decades after 1944, the time is overdue for a new settlement in the relationship between religion and schools. The old settlement no longer works as well as it needs to for the benefit of schools, religion and wider society.

The simple fact is that schools have changed enormously over the last 70 years, and so has religious and non-religious practice and its place in our society.

We have discussed, in some detail, the various aspects of the existing settlement as they operate today, and we have come to a judgment about areas where changes are needed, and areas where they are not, or the situation can be kept under review.

We have not addressed in any detail a number of important practical questions, such as improving teacher supply and quality, developing better course material and ensuring that all teachers are religiously literate. These are exceptionally important, but we think it will be easier to make progress once the overall legal framework is in the right place.

Our recommendations represent our personal views, formed on the basis of relevant recent research, and our respective expertise in politics and religion. We hope that they may be useful in informing a new settlement, and we conclude by listing the recommendations made in the course of the investigation above.

We recommend that:-

Act of Collective Worship

(1) The current requirement in statute for an Act of Collective Worship should be abolished, and the decision about the form and character of school assemblies should be left to the governors of individual schools. Schools should be required to set out their statement and strategy for promoting Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education, with school community assemblies as an important part of that strategy, upon which they would be inspected by OFSTED. The government should provide non-statutory guidance to help achieve this.

Curriculum

(2) Consideration be given to using the phrase 'Religious and Moral Education' rather than 'Religious Education' in describing this part of the statutory curriculum.

(3) The Religious Education syllabus in county and voluntary controlled schools should no longer be set by a system of agreed local syllabuses, but by an agreed national syllabus which would have a similar legal status to the requirements of other subjects in the National Curriculum.

(4) The nationally-agreed syllabus would be determined by the Secretary of State in agreement with a newly created 'National Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (NASACRE)' comprising experts on religion and education, and after formal consultation and input from the relevant established professional bodies and representatives of religions, humanism and other belief systems. This nationally-agreed syllabus should be reviewed every 5/7 years.

(5) The government discusses with the faith school providers, including

academies and free schools, the merits of voluntary-aided and foundation faith schools adopting this nationally-agreed syllabus and, on the basis of such discussions, considers legislating to require all maintained schools to adopt this syllabus.

(6) The government also discusses with faith school providers including academies and free schools, the importance of making a distinction within schools between religious instruction, formation and education, including agreement that religious instruction (even of a kind which does not include coercion, or distortion of other religions or beliefs) does not take place within the school day.

(7) In addition, the government discusses with independent schools whether they should adopt this nationally-agreed syllabus and, on the basis of such discussions, considers legislating to require all schools to adopt this syllabus.

(8) If these changes are agreed, the right of parents to withdraw their children from the Religious Education part of the curriculum should be abolished.

(9) The legal requirement for Religious Education at Key Stage 5, after the age of 16, should be removed and that, within the context of a general reform of the curriculum at Key Stage 4, consideration should be given to modifying the legal requirement for Religious Education to a wider study of religious, spiritual, moral, ethical, social, and cultural values.

(10) All faith schools, and possibly all schools in receipt of state funding, clearly advertise and explain the kind of religious (or non-religious) ethos and formation which they offer, so that prospective parents and pupils can make informed choices.

(11) The local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education

(SACREs) are given a new role which includes participating in the consultations about the content of the national RE curriculum, helping local implementation of the national RE syllabus, promoting community cohesion and educating for diversity, and advising on local availability of religious instruction.

(12) An important, though not the only, way to promote community cohesion and to counter radicalization across the school system is to make the kinds of curriculum change which we are proposing.

OFSTED should re-establish a strong inspection system to ensure that all schools, faith or not, properly fulfil their duty to promote community cohesion

Faith Schools

(13) Children of families of faith should where possible be able to attend schools of that faith, and that their current right to be given priority in the admissions process should not be removed.

(14) The churches need to make strong and continued progress in addressing the very real concerns about fairness, and that changes to the current legal position should be considered as an urgent matter if faith bodies fail to make progress in the directions which they have set for themselves. We believe that there are legitimate concerns about using regular attendance at worship as a selection criterion and we recommend that this criterion be kept under review.

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(15) Further effort be given to developing alternative proposals for fairer admissions procedures to faith schools, procedures which balance the rights of families of faith to have their children educated in that faith with other considerations of fairness to others and serving the whole local community.

(16) The ability of faith schools to retain their own inspection process for the content of collective worship and religious formation should be reconsidered within the context of the overall changes we propose.

(17) The inspection regime for independent schools continue to be steadily tightened in the context of the curricular changes we propose.

(18) The current arrangements which enable faith schools to discriminate in their employment are kept under review, given legitimate concerns about their necessity and their effects.