

Labour Party Policy Review
The School Curriculum
Response from the British Humanist Association

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The BHA has a strong interest in the subjects of RE, PSHE, citizenship and science, as well as collective worship. We have responded to the questions relevant to us below.

We also send with this response, our response to the National Curriculum Review Call for Evidence from April 2011, and to the PSHE Review from November 2011.

About us:

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. We promote Humanism, support and represent the non-religious, and promote a secular state and equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief. Founded in 1896, we have around 30,000 members and supporters, and over 70 local and special interest affiliates.

The BHA is an active member of many organisations working in education. We also provide materials and advice to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics. We have made detailed responses to all recent reviews of the school curriculum, and submit memoranda of evidence to parliamentary select committees on a range of education issues.

With regards to RE, the BHA has been actively involved in supporting education about religions and non-religious beliefs in our classrooms for over fifty years. The BHA was a founder member of the Religious Education Council for England and Wales in 1973, and was involved in the development of the 2004 English *Religious education: The non-statutory national framework*, to which we gave our named support. The BHA was involved in the steering groups that developed the further English non-statutory programmes of study and learning and attainment targets, in 2007 and 2010; and the 2010 non-statutory guidance. The BHA dedicate significant resources to producing classroom materials to support RE (such as the website <http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk/>) and to training RE PGCE students at a number of initial teacher training (ITT) providers across England. The BHA was a donor to the Celebrating RE month in March 2011, and Chief Executive Andrew Copson is a serving director and trustee of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales as well as a Vice Chair of the National Council for Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education, as a result of his position with the BHA.

With regards to PSHE, the BHA is an active member of the National Children's Bureau Sex Education Forum (SEF) and the Children's Rights Alliance for England. We unequivocally support making PSHE a statutory part of the curriculum, and believe that the religious character of a school should not deprive children of their entitlement to good PSHE. We believe that the right of children to PSHE is more important than any other consideration and consequently that the right of parental withdrawal should cease. Our main interest in PSHE is Sex and Relationships Education.

With regards to citizenship, we supported the addition of citizenship education to the National Curriculum, and have continued to work since then in favour of strengthening the subject, and maintaining its place in the National Curriculum.

With regards to science, we support education about the scientific method, and have campaigned extensively around evolution and creationism. We organised the 'Teach evolution, not creationism' campaign (<http://evolutionnotcreationism.org.uk/>), which is supported by organisations such as the Association for Science Education, the British Science Association, the Campaign for Science & Engineering and Ekklesia, and individuals such as Prof David Attenborough, Prof Paul Nurse and the Revd Prof Michael Reiss; the campaign calls for evolution to be added to the primary national curriculum, and for schools to be prevented from teaching creationism or intelligent design as a valid scientific theory.

1. Do you agree with the conclusion of the government panel that the present National Curriculum is in some respects insufficiently challenging and insufficiently precise about what is required to be taught?

As a campaigning organisation with a focus on a few specific subjects, mainly not on the National Curriculum, we have no comment beyond that the National Curriculum should, at a minimum, set out a minimum entitlement of knowledge and skills for all pupils, regardless of background or cultural upbringing.

2. What should be the balance between the part of the curriculum that is nationally prescribed and the part that is determined by individual schools?

e.g. do you allow space for schools to determine part of the curriculum by making fewer subjects compulsory or by making subject requirements in some areas less detailed and prescriptive?

In our experience, when subjects are not on the National Curriculum, this makes for huge variation in quality of what is taught. We refer in particular to RE and PSHE. In both cases, we believe that this is a sufficient issue that the subjects should be added to the National Curriculum.

With regards to RE, the subject is part of the basic curriculum and RE syllabuses are set at the local authority level. There are 151 syllabuses across England, which are rewritten every five years. These massively vary in quality. For example, some curricula do not focus on a broad enough range of religious beliefs, and many exclude humanism and other non-religious beliefs entirely. A few even promote faith as a virtue.

Many are in fact over-prescriptive. Some are even longer than the National Curriculum. This was highlighted by Ofsted as an issue in their most recent report on RE.

With regards to PSHE, only basic sex education is required to be taught by law. We believe that all children are entitled to full, accurate and age-appropriate SRE, including unbiased information on contraception, STIs, abortion, sexual orientation, and the many forms of family relationship conducive to individual fulfilment and the stability of society. As PSHE is not part of the National Curriculum, many schools are able to avoid teaching these subjects entirely, and instead teach (for example) abstinence-only education; the best evidence shows that abstinence-only education is ineffective at reducing teenage pregnancy rates and rates of sexually transmitted infections.

We were greatly disappointed when the provisions to make PSHE a statutory requirement in all schools were dropped from the Children, Schools and Families Bill in 2010.

The issues described here are both in themselves; and in particular, for when pupils move about the country and find that their RE or PSHE syllabus changes entirely.

Therefore, we would like to see both RE and PSHE added to the National Curriculum, and for citizenship to remain there: if it were removed, we would be concerned that a similar drop in quality would ensue.

In particular, what should be compulsory at Key Stage 4?

We would like to see PSHE, RE, citizenship and science education all remain compulsory at Key Stage 4.

3. Should the National Curriculum aim to include the development of transferable and cross curricular skills? If so, how can a National Curriculum address this?

No comment.

4. Should all schools be required to follow the National Curriculum under a Labour government (i.e. including Academies and Free Schools)?

We believe that all schools, including Academies and Free Schools, should have to teach the National Curriculum. As we stated earlier, we see the National Curriculum's function as imparting knowledge and skills to which all pupils should be entitled.

As Academies and Free Schools are entirely removed from local authority control and free to teach their own curriculum, there are few safeguards to protect children from extreme religious agendas. We believe there need to be legal safeguards to ensure that the curriculum is protected and that they will not be able to teach creationism, unbalanced religious education or flawed sex and relationships education. For example, as Academies and Free Schools do not need to teach National Curriculum science, they are not required to teach even basic biological aspects of sexual reproduction, anatomy and puberty.

We are also concerned about Academies and Free Schools not having to hire qualified teachers – potentially opening up teaching to further theological influences.

If so will there be sufficient scope for innovation and experiment by individual schools?

We believe there is a genuine debate to be had between educators over how prescriptive the National Curriculum should be. But we do not believe that requiring schools to teach the National Curriculum would restrict innovation and experiment in any negative way: there is no evidence to support this.

5. What areas in relation to the curriculum should Labour's policy review focus on over the next few months?

The BHA has a strong interest in the subjects of RE, PSHE, citizenship and science, as well as collective worship. RE, PSHE and collective worship in particular have often been neglected by

governments and excluded from major reviews due to their absence from the National Curriculum. As a result, we believe that these three subjects are in particular need of attention.

6. How can we best seek the views of wider stakeholders such as parents, employers and young people themselves?

No comment.

7. Are there any other comments you wish to add?

We would like this review to look at school assemblies. The BHA supports the repeal of the current law on Collective Worship, and a new requirement to be brought in for inclusive assemblies that favour the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of all pupils, regardless of religion or belief. For example, during last year's passage of the Education Bill through the House of Lords, we worked with Baroness Massey of Darwen in tabling an amendment that specified, 'Each pupil in attendance at a community, foundation or voluntary school or an Academy shall on each school day take part in an assembly, which shall be directed at least in part towards furthering the spiritual, moral, social and cultural education of the pupils... such assemblies should not include any religious worship.'

This policy is the same as that which was supported in 1998 by, among others: the Buddhist Society; the Sikh Education Council; the National Council of Hindu Temples; the Board of Deputies of British Jews; the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL); the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT); the National Union of Teachers (NUT); the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT); the Secondary Heads Association (SHA); the Christian Education Movement (CEM); the Professional Council for Religious Education (PcFRE); the Conference of University Lecturers in Religious Education (CULRE); the Association of Religious Education Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC); the Welsh Association of SACREs (WASACRE); the Local Government Association (LGA); the Values Education Council (VEC); the Society of Education Officers (SEO); and the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations (NCPTA).¹

The same position has since been endorsed by many other organisations including numerous religious ones such as the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís, the Unitarian church, British Muslims for Secular Democracy, Hindu Academy and more.

The public also consistently agrees. Most recently, in July, a ComRes poll for the BBC found that 60% thought that the law on worship should not be enforced.²

We are submitting with this response, our response to the coalition government's curriculum review in April 2011. However, we would like to also include our summary to that response here:

We are in agreement with the government that a National Curriculum should teach 'the essential knowledge and understanding that pupils should be expected to have to enable them to take their place as educated members of society'. We also agree that a good National Curriculum 'should embody our cultural and scientific inheritance; the best that our past and present generations have to pass on to the next.'

In keeping with these principles, our main recommendations are:

¹ http://www.culham.ac.uk/Res_conf/cw_reviewed/consultation.html

² [http://www.comres.co.uk/polls/BBC_Religion_Worship_in_schools_results_\(plus_regions\)_July11.pdf](http://www.comres.co.uk/polls/BBC_Religion_Worship_in_schools_results_(plus_regions)_July11.pdf)

Religious Education (RE)

- *Education about religious and non-religious worldviews (currently taught through Religious Education (RE)) should be made a National Curriculum subject. This is to ensure that the provision of such education in schools is of a higher standard, less prescriptive and includes learning about Britain's rich humanist heritage as well as its religious traditions.*

Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE)

- *All children should have access to age-appropriate PSHE including Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) through making PSHE a compulsory part of the National Curriculum. The Macdonald review of PSHE, carried out by the last government recommended that PSHE became part of the National Curriculum. We encourage the government to use this current opportunity to make this change.*

Science

- *Pupils should learn about and investigate the concepts of natural selection and evolution. Evolution is arguably the single most important idea underlying the life sciences today. In order to lay the foundation for a full scientific understanding of the subject it is vital that the subject is included in the primary curriculum as well as taught in all years of secondary education.*
- *In order for students to be able to understand the facts that the National Curriculum will impart to them, the science curriculum should make direct reference to the value of science as a way of finding out knowledge. Pupils should understand that the scientific method has provided a consistently reliable way of finding provisional answers to questions about the nature and behaviour of things. They should understand that it is rational, universal, enquiry-based, and one of humanity's greatest achievements.*
- *SRE including the basic principles of human reproduction and physiology must be included in the science curriculum from primary school. It is essential that all children are able to learn about the changes to the human body caused by puberty and how to respond to them in advance of them experiencing these changes. Good SRE reduces unwanted pregnancies, the incidence of abortion and sexually transmitted diseases.*

Citizenship

- *Citizenship education should be maintained within the National Curriculum. The subject has an important role imparting knowledge and understanding of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It is essential to enable all children from a range of backgrounds to participate fully in a free and open society.*