

BHA BRIEFING: concerns about the state funding of Steiner schools 15 January 2014



Briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA)

The BHA has a large number of varied concerns about the state funding of Steiner schools. So far there are three such schools (a sponsored Academy and two Free Schools), with a fourth due to open in September. These concerns range from the quality of education provided, to pseudoscience on the curriculum, to homeopathy being given to pupils (which is unique), and at least one of the schools opting out of providing vaccinations (which is extremely unusual). The place of anthroposophy in the schools is consistently misunderstood. The human rights implications of state funded Steiner schools have not been properly considered. Finally, we are concerned that the first two Steiner schools to open did so despite widespread local opposition, and we have reason to believe that the Government's Free Schools team opposed the establishment of Steiner Free Schools, but were overruled by ministers.

How many Steiner schools are there?

Steiner schools (known in other countries as Waldorf schools) are based on the works and teachings of Austrian esoterist and mystic Rudolf Steiner. The first Steiner school opened in Germany in 1919, and **globally** today there are over 1,000 mainstream Steiner schools, 2,000 kindergartens and almost 650 special needs centres.¹

In England Steiner schools fall under the remit of the Steiner-Waldorf Schools Fellowship (SWSF),² and there are 23 **private Steiner schools**, all of which include early years provision, 14 further early years providers,³ and five special schools.⁴ An as-yet unpublished investigation by us has found that 26 nurseries have since 2010 received funding through the Government's scheme of providing 15 hours a week of free nursery provision to two, three and four year olds.

As for **state Steiner schools**, there are three state funded Steiner schools, with a fourth due to open in September, and seven more proposed. The first to open was the Steiner Academy Hereford, which opened in 2008 as one of the 203 sponsored Academies that opened under Labour. After the Coalition Government introduced the Free Schools programme, Steiner groups began applying en masse to open Steiner Free Schools, with 30 such applications over the first four years of the programme.⁵ Applications initially came from existing private schools looking to join the state sector, but more recently applications have been for brand new schools.

The first successful Free School application (and so second state school) was the Steiner Academy Frome, which opened in 2012. Steiner Academy Exeter opened in 2013, and Steiner Academy Bristol

¹ Waldorf Worldwide, Waldorf World List, September 2013: <http://www.freunde-waldorf.de/en/waldorf-worldwide/waldorf-education/waldorf-world-list.html>

² The SWSF hold a trademark in the UK.

³ Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, List of Schools, as of January 2014: <http://www.steinerwaldorf.org/steiner-schools/list-of-schools/>

⁴ The Camphill Communities: <http://www.camphill.org.uk/communities>

⁵ See <http://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/List-of-proposed-Free-Schools.xlsx> for details.

is backed by the Government to open this September. Further schools are currently being proposed in South Hams, North Devon, Maidstone, Stroud, Sussex Weald, Lincolnshire and Leeds.⁶

We will look in more detail at the open state schools in this briefing.

Anthroposophy

Central to understanding Steiner schools' pedagogy is understanding anthroposophy, or 'spiritual science'. Rudolf Steiner founded anthroposophy, which postulates that there is a spiritual world, and it is possible to objectively comprehend this world by cultivating a form of clairvoyance.

Anthroposophy involves beliefs such as in karma, reincarnation,⁷ and the efficacy of a wide variety of alternative medicines, including homeopathy, and scepticism of vaccinations. Indeed Trevor Mepham, head of the Frome Academy and former head of the Hereford Academy, when asked by the BBC if he believed in reincarnation, said 'I am open to it as a possibility, yep.'⁸

Anthroposophy forms the educational pedagogy that underpins Steiner schools, and anthroposophy traditionally holds that the point of Steiner education is to improve children's karma by nurturing their connection to the spirit world.

The Department for Education says that they have gained assurances from the four state schools that they don't/won't teach anthroposophy, and the Academies themselves repeatedly make this claim when challenged.⁹ However, these responses misunderstand the place of anthroposophy in the schools. Like all pedagogies, anthroposophy is not taught directly to students and parents even in private schools, many of whom will never have heard of it: instead, anthroposophy informs what the teachers teach.

Indeed, the SWSF say on their website that 'Steiner education is based on an understanding of child development that has its roots in a philosophy known as 'anthroposophy' (Download Steiner-Anthroposophy-background.pdf (224.0 KB)). The educational content of anthroposophy informs the work of the teachers; it is not a belief system and is not taught in our schools.'¹⁰ Until November 2012 its membership criteria for schools said that amongst staff there should be 'adequate preparation, including Anthroposophical study' and stated that 'an Anthroposophical impulse lies at the heart of planning for the school, including the Waldorf curriculum'.¹¹ The Hereford, Frome, Exeter and Bristol schools signed up to these criteria. The Code of Practice also describes as good practice that 'An Anthroposophical doctor visits the school regularly'.¹² The SWSF's Easter 2013

⁶ See <http://www.steineracademysouthhams.org.uk/>, <http://www.steineracademynorthdevon.org.uk/>, <https://www.facebook.com/SteinerAcademyMaidstoneProject>, <http://stroudsteinerfreeschool.org.uk/>, <http://www.wealdfreeschool.org.uk/>, <http://www.thesteineracademylincolnshire.org/> and <http://steineracademyleeds.squarespace.com/>

⁷ Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain's website: <http://www.freezepage.com/1319204299NPATSCHVVX>

⁸ BBC Inside Out South West's report on Steiner Academy Frome, November 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpOXitdxzk4>

⁹ For example, as we write a local story says 'a spokesman for the Stroud Steiner Free School Initiative said that although the school will have a Steiner curriculum no anthroposophy will be taught within the school.' Kate Wilson, 'Application submitted for Steiner Free School in Stroud', *Stroud News & Journal*, 20 January 2014: http://www.stroudnewsandjournal.co.uk/news/10949945.Application_submitted_for_Steiner_Free_School_in_Stroud/

¹⁰ <http://www.steinerwaldorf.org/> – see also the FAQ on anthroposophy at <http://www.steinerwaldorf.org/steiner-education/frequently-asked-questions/>

¹¹ <http://www.freezepage.com/1335964451IVRLKRETFY> – the BHA drew attention to this in September 2012; two months later a revised version was published removing such mentions.

¹² <http://www.steinerwaldorf.org/?ddownload=550>

teachers' conference had a discussion group on 'How do we see Anthroposophy informing our teaching and preparation? In what sense can it be said to be the 'life blood' of our school? How do we go about dealing with the sensitive issues it can raise within our school communities? What pitfalls must we try to avoid? How can we explain what Anthroposophy means, pedagogically, to our critics?'¹³

Hereford's staff application form asks applicants to provide as 'additional information to support your application' details of 'Your awareness of Anthroposophy'.¹⁴ A 2012 Freedom of Information (FOI) request by the BHA showed the school repeatedly mentioning anthroposophy to parents in its newsletters, including a statement that 'Anthroposophy [is] at the heart of the school', and that 'at the centre of it all is... Anthroposophy from which the whole brilliant enterprise derives'.¹⁵

Nonetheless, a large part of Steiner schools' success in gaining state funding is as a result of their dismissing concerns related to Steiner's beliefs about anthroposophy, including as it is taught in the existing private schools, instead claiming that the state schools behave differently. However, regardless of how much anthroposophy is ascribed to or believed in, it remains the case that state schools act consistently with anthroposophy in a number of ways which are themselves concerning: namely, in what is taught in science; in the approach to alternative medicine; and in not providing vaccinations. We will come onto these issues in due course.

General approach to learning

Age of learning: As all the state Steiner schools are private schools or Academies, they do not have to follow the national curriculum (which only maintained schools must follow). Pupils don't start to learn to read, write or count until six or seven,¹⁶ with earlier lessons instead focusing on play; they don't start to use computers until the age of 14. The movement argues that this is because earlier education ultimately damages children's development, and Steiner educators are involved in initiatives such as the Save Childhood Campaign's Too Much, Too Soon campaign.¹⁷ However, anthroposophy gives different reasons for not educating at an early age, namely that to do so damages children's sense of play, harming their imagination and so their connection to the spirit world, thus hurting their karma.¹⁸ Steiner specified that there are three stages of child development, each lasting seven years, which represented distinct phases of children incarnating into their bodies.

As a consequence for their concerns about premature learning, private Steiner schools have opted out of the early years foundation stage, and the Steiner Academies have opted out of having to provide key stage 1 statutory assessments,¹⁹ being the only state schools to have been granted such an opt out. These opt outs were secured through human rights arguments. We will return to this later.

¹³ <http://www.steineracademyhereford.eu/download/information/Actual%20for%20Web.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://www.steineracademyhereford.eu/download/application-forms/SAH-Staff-Application-Form.doc>

¹⁵ 'Searches on anthroposophy/anthroposophical/homeopathy/school doctor in Friday Flier/Bulletin Newsletters from September 2008 to July 2012', provided by Steiner Academy Hereford 4 October 2010: <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Searches-on-anthroposophy-redacted.pdf>

¹⁶ See the formal learning FAQ at <http://www.steinerwaldorf.org/steiner-education/frequently-asked-questions/>

¹⁷ <http://www.savechildhood.net/advisors.html>

¹⁸ See, e.g. <http://www.steineracademybristol.org.uk/steiner-education/anthroposophy-and-education/> which says that 'For [Steiner], this related to the stages by which the soul is incarnated into the body; before seven, the spirit is still adjusting to the material world.'

¹⁹ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/WrittenEvidence.svc/EvidenceHtml/4617>

Exam results and curriculum breadth: Steiner schools have an aversion to set text books and curriculum books. The Steiner Academy Hereford told the BHA that it has just one book it uses: ‘The school implements its Curriculum through the schemes of work as detailed in *The Educational Tasks and Content of the Steiner Waldorf Curriculum* edited by Martyn Rawson and Tobias Richter.’

The exam results of Steiner schools are often poor. At Steiner Academy Hereford, in key stage 2 exams last year, just 3% of pupils achieved level 4 or above in English, maths and science, compared to 75% nationally. At key stage 4, 64% of pupils achieve 5+ A*-C GCSEs (or equivalent) including English and maths, above the national average of 59.4%.²⁰ But pupils are on average entered to just 3.7 GCSEs (namely, 2 English, maths, and Spanish or art, which are offered ‘as new curricular developments’) along with a BTEC in Countryside and Natural Environment, worth 2 GCSEs. It isn’t possible to take qualifications in other subjects.²¹ On the other hand, from years 1-8, ‘core curriculum’ time is given to ‘World Literature: fairy tales, legends, fables and myth.’²² Anthroposophy postulates that the spirit world is populated by many different spirits, such as nature, elemental and root spirits, which are represented in the real world as gnomes.²³

The Steiner Academy Frome says that ‘Subject lessons include regular practice lessons in English and Maths, as well as eurythmy (a form of movement which will be unique to Steiner schools), Spanish and Mandarin, a wide range of arts, music and crafts, outdoor activities including games and land-work.’²⁴

Most of the private Steiner schools perform well below average at key stage 4, as well as offering about 4-5 GCSE-equivalent qualifications.²⁵

Inspections: Since 2008, groups of independent schools have been able to decide that instead of being inspected by Ofsted, they would rather be inspected by an independent inspectorate which is in turn inspected by Ofsted.²⁶ This way they can ensure that the inspectors are more sensitive to their particular pedagogies. The School Inspection Service was established in December that year to inspect schools that are part of the Focus Learning Trust (i.e. Exclusive Brethren), and the following year took on the inspection of Steiner schools as well.²⁷

Science curriculum

It’s worth re-iterating that the Steiner Academy Hereford doesn’t offer science GCSEs, and it appears the Frome Academy doesn’t either. As already stated, the only curriculum book used by the Hereford Academy is *The Educational Tasks and Content of the Steiner Waldorf Curriculum* edited by Martyn Rawson and Tobias Richter. When campaigner Mark Hayes asked specifically about what is

²⁰ Steiner Academy Hereford’s exam results, Department for Education website:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/cgi-bin/schools/performance/school.pl?urn=135672>

²¹ <http://www.steineracademyhereford.eu/our-school/academic-achievement/>

²² http://www.steineracademyhereford.eu/the-school-years/curriculum/?doing_wp_cron=1389961080.3138399124145507812500

²³ See e.g. ‘My Waldorf-Student Son Believes in Gnomes—and That’s Fine With Me’, *The Atlantic*: <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/04/my-waldorf-student-son-believes-in-gnomes-and-thats-fine-with-me/274521/>. See also discussion of fire gnomes at the Steiner Academy Frome in BBC Inside Out South West’s November 2012 investigation: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpOXitdxzk4>

²⁴ <http://www.steineracademyfrome.co.uk/faqs/teaching/>

²⁵ <http://www.education.gov.uk/cgi-bin/schools/performance/search.pl?searchType=location&location=steiner&distance=1&phase=all>

²⁶ Education and Skills Act 2008 sections 106-7: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/25/part/4/chapter/1/crossheading/independent-inspectorates>

²⁷ <http://www.schoolinspectionservice.co.uk/>

taught in science, he was told that the book 'is about as comprehensive as you can get and what we use as a guide to what we teach when.'²⁸ The Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship's partner bookshop describes the book by saying 'This handbook is indispensable for all Steiner-Waldorf schools and teachers... A comprehensive overview of what is taught in Steiner-Waldorf schools, and why.'²⁹

However, examining the book's lesson plans reveals a wide range of pseudoscientific ideas. For example:

1. When discussing atomic theory and its potential limitations in Chemistry (class 10, p93) **homeopathy** is used as 'a good example of an effect that cannot be explained by the dominant [atomic] model'. The teaching of 'homeopathic and/or other models of the interaction of matter and life' is specifically advocated. Homeopathy is based on the idea that a substance that would normally cause a disease would, if highly diluted, cure that disease. Homeopathy is scientifically implausible, and evidence overwhelmingly shows that it works no better than placebo.
2. In Life Sciences class 3, p165: '**Creation stories** give an holistic image of the origins of the earth, plants, animals and human beings'. Reservations expressed around the teaching of **Darwinian evolution** reinforce the concern around creation stories (Life Sciences, class 12, p171): 'The Darwinian mechanism delivers clarifying power within a certain range of phenomena, but it is rooted in reductionist thinking and Victorian ethics and young people need to emerge from school with a clear sense of its limits...'
3. 'The **circulation of blood** is not a closed system and the pump model is not sufficient to understand the circulation of the blood and the sensitivity of the heart to the emotions' (Life Sciences class 9, p171). This reflects Steiner's teaching in other books that 'The heart is not a pump ... basically the heart is a sense organ.'
4. In Life Sciences class 9, p171, the 'whole nature of disease' is discussed. Specific topics include: 'the limitations of the "germ" theory, which omits the part played by the immune system and the degree to which this is strengthened by exposure to illness', 'can some illnesses actually be necessary?' and vaccinations in the context of the 'rejection of foreign proteins by the immune system', related topics being rhesus babies and AIDS. This is consistent with attitudes to illness and vaccination in anthroposophic communities and the promotion of anthroposophic medicine, which we will discuss more in due course.
5. **Geometry** receives a particular emphasis in the Steiner curriculum and is often the subject of a 'Main Lesson' in its own right. In his book *The Fourth Dimension: Sacred Geometry, Alchemy, and Mathematics*, Steiner describes 'the relationship between geometric studies and developing direct perception of spiritual realities'. Although we can speculate on its motivation, the geometry curriculum seems conventional enough except for the inclusion of 'counter space' (p58) which is a specifically Anthroposophical construction that allows links to Steiner's spirit world.³⁰ In other books, Steiner describes 'the relationship between geometric studies and developing direct perception of spiritual realities'.

The same book also features in the recommended reading list from the University of Plymouth Steiner Waldorf teacher training BA,³¹ which was the only Steiner teacher training course until it recently closed (there is now an MA at Canterbury Christ Church University). The reading list includes many books expounding Anthroposophy and Steiner's views on everything from science to

²⁸ Email to Mark on 12 August 2011

²⁹ Floris Books' description of *The Tasks and Content of the Steiner-Waldorf Curriculum*, as the next edition of the book will be known: <http://www.florisbooks.co.uk/book/Martyn-Rawson/Tasks+and+Content+of+the+Steiner-Waldorf+Curriculum/9781782500421>

³⁰ See <http://www.nct.anth.org.uk/counter.htm> for more.

³¹ <http://ukanthroposophy.wordpress.com/plymreadinglists/>

race. The fact that teachers are being educated using these resources must surely be of grave concern.

Since January 2012, Free Schools have been precluded by their funding agreements from teaching pseudoscience in their curriculums.³² However, this rule does not apply to the Hereford Academy, as its funding agreement pre-dates its introduction.

Homeopathy, other anthroposophical medicine and vaccinations

Homeopathy: We have already mentioned that Steiner Academy Hereford's curriculum book includes homeopathy in its chemistry lessons. In fact the school has extensive policies on alternative medicine, employing an 'anthroposophical doctor' who regularly sees many of the children.³³ The school has a specific policy on the administration of homeopathic remedies, including for burns.³⁴

We are not aware of non-Steiner state schools offering homeopathy. 'Introduction to Homeopathy' courses for parents are regularly held at the school, and in its weekly newsletters the school has also supported campaigns to keep homeopathy in the NHS and on sale in Boots, promoting pseudoscientific arguments in support of its efficacy.³⁵

STEINER ACADEMY HEREFORD

The administration of homeopathic remedies policy

The Academy's first aid resources include a small range of homeopathic remedies as a supportive measure for a pupil whose parents/carers wish homeopathic remedies to be used for their child should the need arise at school.

The homeopathic remedies currently available in school are:

Arnica (x 6)	(for bruising)
Arnica Cream/Lotion	(for bruising)
Combudoron Lotion	(for the relief of insect bites)
Rescue Remedy	(for shock, distress, accident)
Natural Health Spray	(for cuts, grazes)
Burnfree	(soothing, healing in case of burns)

Anthroposophical medicine incorporates a number of different forms of alternative medicine, including homeopathy. Although it does not appear that this has been prescribed at the school, it is perhaps best known for the belief that mistletoe can cure cancer.³⁶

Eurythmy: Another form of anthroposophical medicine that is prescribed at the school is 'eurythmy therapy',³⁷ a form of dance believed to treat a wide range of medical conditions such as depression

³² BHA, 'Government changes Free School model funding agreement to ban creationist schools', 10 January 2012: <https://humanism.org.uk/news/view/961>

³³ 'Searches on anthroposophy/anthroposophical/homeopathy/school doctor in Friday Flier/Bulletin Newsletters from September 2008 to July 2012 – From Friday Flier 12/06/2009', provided by Steiner Academy Hereford 4 October 2010: <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Searches-on-anthroposophy-redacted.pdf> – obtained through FOI

³⁴ 'Steiner Academy Hereford: The administration of homeopathic remedies policy', 27 January 2011: <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/steiner-academy-hereford-homeopathy-policy.pdf> – obtained through FOI

³⁵ 'From Friday Flier 26/02/2010', provided by Steiner Academy Hereford 4 October 2010: <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Searches-on-anthroposophy-redacted.pdf>

³⁶ For example, in 2012 the University of Aberdeen decided not to establish a chair in integrative healthcare and management funded by anthroposophists after controversy over this and other treatments. Paul Jump, 'Aberdeen decides against alternative medicine chair', *Times Higher Education*, 11 May 2012: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/419909.article>

³⁷ http://www.steineracademyhereford.eu/the-school-years/curriculum/?doing_wp_cron=1389961080.3138399124145507812500

and ADHD.³⁸ Some of the school's pupil premium budget is spent on employing two eurythmy therapists.³⁹

Vaccinations: In 2012, *GP Magazine* sent freedom of information requests to primary care trusts asking about schools opting out of the HPV vaccine programme. Slightly over half of PCTs responded, revealing 24 schools had opted out, many of which did so for religious reasons.⁴⁰ Most were likely private schools, but a subsequent FOI request to Wye Valley NHS Trust revealed that Steiner Academy Hereford had also opted out, as 'The school states that it is not their policy to offer children immunisation within the school'.⁴¹ Indeed, the Steiner movement has a history of opposition to vaccinations, with Steiner himself saying that they damage karma⁴² – although lately it has been advocating a line of parental choice.⁴³

However, the consequence of schools not offering vaccines, and many individual teachers still not supporting vaccination, is that the schools attract parents similarly opposed, or not motivated enough to get vaccinations independently, and so outbreaks of diseases are a common occurrence. In 2011, the inter-Steiner school Olympics was cancelled due to an outbreak of measles at the host school.⁴⁴ A year later the same school had rubella and whooping cough outbreaks.⁴⁵ The consequence of all this is that the Health Protection Agency regards Steiner schools as 'unvaccinated communities' that are 'high risk' and 'hard to reach'.⁴⁶ If vaccines were offered, then individual parents that are opposed could still opt out, but general take-up would be higher.

Steiner Academy Frome: During the consultation process for the Frome Academy, NHS Somerset responded 'to raise awareness of the potential health protection issues for children attending this school and also potential implications for the wider local population. We are aware from our knowledge of other Steiner schools in our area that a significant number of parents elect to opt out of the routine childhood immunisation programmes offered to children across England... If a high population wide vaccination rate is not maintained, it is possible for diseases which were previously thought rare to re-emerge and threaten the health of the wider community... Evidence of outbreaks of preventable disease has previously been published relating to similar establishments in both the UK and also Europe. References for these papers are detailed below for information. These papers demonstrate both the potential susceptibility in these unimmunised populations and the implications for further transmission to the wider population within which the establishment is sited.'⁴⁷

³⁸ See e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcCvcy0zAlM>

³⁹ 'Pupil Premium funding at Steiner Academy Hereford': http://www.steineracademyhereford.eu/our-school/pupil-premium/?doing_wp_cron=1389961235.3379631042480468750000

⁴⁰ 'Exclusive: GPs not told of school HPV opt-outs', *GP Magazine*, 18 July 2012:

<http://www.gponline.com/News/article/1141051/Exclusive-GPs-not-told-school-HPV-opt-outs/>

⁴¹ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/schools_opting_out_of_hpv_vaccin_169

⁴² <http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/ManfKarma/19100525p01.html>

⁴³ See 'Statement of European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education on the Question of Vaccination':

http://www.ecswe.net/downloads/statements/ecswe_vaccinationstatement.pdf

⁴⁴ East Grinstead Observer, 'Budding sports stars battled through measles outbreak', 7 July 2011:

<http://www.eastgrinsteadcourier.co.uk/Budding-sports-stars-battled-measles-outbreak/story-12897555-detail/story.html>

⁴⁵ 'Rubella and Whooping Cough at Michael Hall', 18 June 2012:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130212090805/http://www.michaelhall.co.uk/school-life/news/2012/06/>

⁴⁶ 'HPA National Measles Guidelines Local & Regional Services', 28 October 2010:

http://www.hpa.org.uk/webc/HPAwebFile/HPAweb_C/1274088429847

⁴⁷ As quoted by Andy Lewis, 'Steiner Schools, Vaccination and Measles Outbreaks', 26 April 2013:

<http://www.quackometer.net/blog/2013/04/steiner-schools-vaccination-and-measles-outbreaks.html>

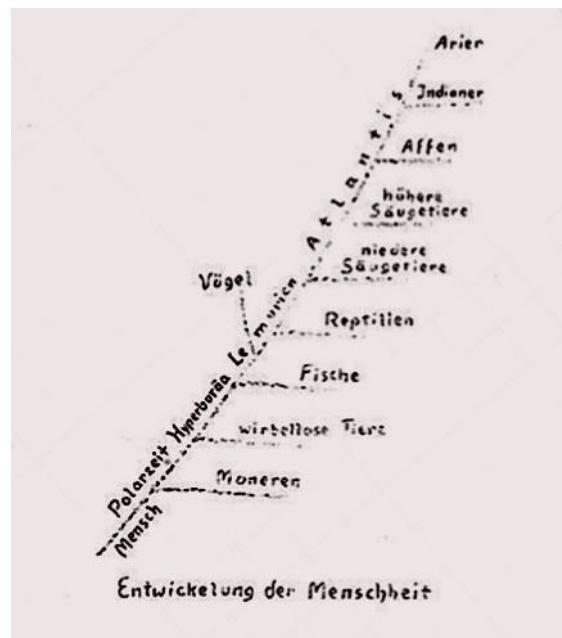
However, the DfE's impact assessment dismissed these concerns, simply saying 'NHS Somerset is concerned about the possible effect that a number of unimmunised children in one area could have. They are of the opinion that a Steiner school would attract children of families where immunisation is not the norm, but there is no concrete evidence to suggest that this will be the case.'⁴⁸

Surely schools, which have a duty of care towards children and their wellbeing, should advocate vaccination, making vaccines available to pupils, and should not provide and promote medicines such as homeopathy which lack efficacy and can in fact be harmful, given its widespread prescription by lay homeopaths for dangerous diseases such as malaria?⁴⁹

Government view: As already stated, Free Schools are not allowed to teach pseudoscience in their curriculums. The BHA asked the Department for Education (DfE) whether that ban would similarly mean rejection for any Free Schools proposing to give homeopathy to children, or opting out of vaccinations. We were told that these issues would be considered, but would not lead to an outright rejection, as creationism would. We also asked what regulation there is of the health policies of state schools. The DfE replied that there is none: 2005 guidance on the matter⁵⁰ has been withdrawn by the Coalition, and this at any rate did not mention alternative medicine or efficacy of treatments.

Racism

Accusations of racism have long dogged the Steiner school movement, although haven't been connected to the state schools. Steiner believed that different races were at different levels of the spiritual hierarchy, with 'Aryans' being the highest incarnation.⁵¹ One book by Steiner on the Plymouth recommended reading says 'People and races are after all, merely different developmental stages in our evolution toward a pure humanity. The more perfectly that individual members of a race or people express the pure, ideal human type-the more they have worked their way through from the physical and mortal to the super sensible and immortal realm-the "higher" this race or nation is'.⁵²



Two parents who contacted us sent their mixed-race daughter to the Kings Langley Steiner School. In one lesson her German teacher read out a poem from a book which she translated as 'the boy got so much chocolate on his face he looked like a nigger'.⁵³ The daughter complained that the word is

⁴⁸ DfE, Steiner Academy Frome impact assessment:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251414/Steiner_Academy_Frome_-_Impact_Assessment_2012.pdf

⁴⁹ See Sense about Science and Simon Singh's investigations into homeopathy and malaria:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/malaria-and-homeopathy.html>

⁵⁰ DfE, 'Managing Medicines in Schools and Early Years Settings', 2005:

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DFES-1448-2005>

⁵¹ <http://www.quackometer.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/steiner-heirarchy.jpg>

⁵² *How to Know Higher Worlds* page 108, Rudolf Steiner

⁵³ The poem was from anthroposophist Alfred Baur's *Bli - bla - blu: Reime, Verse und Lieder, die bei Kindern Freude am schönen Sprechen wecken wollen*, Mellinger Verlag, 1972: <http://www.amazon.de/Bli-Lieder-Kindern-sch%C3%B6nen-Sprechen/dp/3880690618/>

racist, but was told that 'nigger' is not a racist word and was moved to the corner of the room for complaining. Meanwhile, another student who told the daughter that 'all black people are niggers' was not punished at all. 'The teacher was not disciplined, but the Education Co-ordinator point blank refused to answer us when we asked him if he believed in Steiner's theory that people reincarnate through the races starting with black and progressing upwards to white, with blond blue eyed people at the top.' Subsequently to this, the parents persuaded the teachers to have a racism awareness day, but at that, 'a few teachers filled in every ethnicity on the form as they said they had been through all races: the teachers were white so obviously saw themselves as being at the pinnacle.'

The European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education says that 'Anthroposophy, upon which Waldorf education is founded, stands firmly against all forms of racism and nationalism. Throughout Steiner's work there is a consistent anti-racist sentiment and he frequently described racist views as being anachronistic and antithetical to basic human values and dignity. The Waldorf schools are aware, however, that occasional phrases in Rudolf Steiner's complete works are not in concordance with this fundamental direction and have a discriminatory effect.'⁵⁴

Trevor Mepham, the head of the Frome Academy and former head of the Hereford Academy, told the BBC that 'I do acknowledge that some of the things that were said in the 1920s do not sound quite right today in the 21st century. What I'm saying is that fundamentally, Rudolf Steiner is not a racist and these schools do not promote anything like that.'⁵⁵

Are Steiner schools 'faith' schools?

Steiner schools are not 'faith' schools in the sense that they are not legally designated with a religious character, a process that most (but not all) state funded schools with a religious ethos go through. The Steiner movement also doesn't consider itself to be a faith, although we would disagree with that.

However, human rights law refers to 'religions and philosophical convictions' together, creating a legal equivalence between religions and other worldviews. The Steiner movement in the UK has twice identified itself as just such a philosophical conviction when it has been legally advantageous to do so.

In particular, article 2 of protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) guarantees that 'In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.' In practice, this does not mean that the state has to fund any type of school, whether religious or Steiner, but it does mean that the state must not indoctrinate children into a certain religion or non-religious belief against the wishes of their parents.

Early Years Foundation Stage exemptions: The first time this became relevant to the Steiner movement was in September 2008, when the Government introduced the early years foundation stage (EYFS), which places requirements of basic teaching in reading, writing and numeracy for all early years providers (whether state funded or not). Clearly such requirements interfere with Steiner

⁵⁴ ECSWE statement 'based on the Stuttgart Declaration, which was adopted by the General Assembly of the German Association of Waldorf Schools (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen) in Stuttgart on October 28 2007' and subsequently translated and adopted by ECSWE:

http://www.ecswe.org/downloads/statements/ecswe_discriminationstatement.pdf

⁵⁵ BBC Inside Out South West investigation, November 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpOXitdxzk4>

schools' approach of no formal teaching until age 6/7. And so in 2009, a group of Steiner parents at Wynstones Steiner School threatened the Government with judicial review, with support from the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship.⁵⁶ In doing so, their solicitors argued that Steiner beliefs are a philosophical conviction under the ECHR. The Government conceded the case and allowed opt outs.

33 Steiner providers subsequently sought and gained exemption from the EYFS, i.e. virtually all of them, with only two other schools also gaining exemption.⁵⁷ However, gaining exemption required the majority of parents at the school to support the proposals and it needed renewing every two years, which the SWSF complained was cumbersome. As a result the 2011 Tickell Review into the EYFS recommended these requirements be dropped,⁵⁸ which they were the following year.⁵⁹

More recent (as yet unpublished) work by the BHA has discovered that at least 26 of these nurseries have in recent years been receiving funding through the Government's scheme of providing 15 hours a week of free nursery provision to two, three and four year olds. This was in spite of the fact that the relevant 2012 regulations said that nurseries which had exempted themselves from providing the EYFS were ineligible for such funding.⁶⁰ The BHA pointed this inconsistency out to the DfE,⁶¹ but to our alarm, the subsequent 2013 regulations 'fixed' the problem by simply removing the part stating that such nurseries are ineligible for funding.⁶²

Key Stage 1 exemptions: Every Academy and Free School's funding agreement specifies that 'The Academy Trust shall ensure that the Academy complies with any guidance issued by the Secretary of State from time to time to ensure that pupils take part in assessments and in teacher assessments of pupils' performance as they apply to maintained schools.' However, following on from the successful establishment of opt outs from the EYFS, the Steiner Academy Hereford (and subsequently the other Steiner schools) used the same arguments to establish opt outs from key stage 1 tests:⁶³ their funding agreements add 'other than the end of KS1 assessments.' They are the only state schools to be exempt from this requirement.

Human rights implications: Many children are sent to 'faith' schools against their parents' wishes, and this could potentially be an infringement of article 2 of protocol 1 of the ECHR; however, the DfE aims to meet their legal obligations of not indoctrinating by allowing parents to opt their children out of Religious Education and Collective Worship (i.e. the non-secular portions of the curriculum).

⁵⁶ <http://www.savesteinerschools.org/> and for SWSF support, <http://www.savesteinerschools.org/?p=22>

⁵⁷ The Early Years Foundation Stage (Exemptions from Learning and Development Requirements) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 impact assessment:

http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2012/2463/pdfs/uksifia_20122463_en.pdf

⁵⁸ Dame Clare Tickell, 'The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning. An Independent Report on the Early Years Foundation Stage to Her Majesty's Government', 2011:

<http://media.education.gov.uk/MediaFiles/B/1/5/%7BBB15EFF0D-A4DF-4294-93A1-1E1B88C13F68%7DTickell%20review.pdf>

⁵⁹ The Early Years Foundation Stage (Exemptions from Learning and Development Requirements)

(Amendment) Regulations 2012, 26 October 2012: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2012/2463/made>

⁶⁰ The Local Authority (Duty to Secure Early Years Provision Free of Charge) Regulations 2012:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2012/2488/regulation/2/made>

⁶¹ See the BHA's response to the DfE's 'Consultation on proposed changes to the role of the local authority in early education and childcare', 6 May 2013: <http://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Role-of-LA-response-form-4-response-from-the-British-Humanist-Association.pdf>

⁶² The Local Authority (Duty to Secure Early Years Provision Free of Charge) Regulations 2013:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2013/3193/regulation/2/made>

⁶³ See emails between the BHA and DfE of 13 September 2012: <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Steiner-schools-KS1-opt-outs.pdf>

Similarly, children might be sent to Steiner schools against their parents' wishes. Given that Steiner schools' philosophical convictions are legally equivalent to having a religious ethos, it follows from this and from all the other evidence of teaching unscientific beliefs that teaching of Steiner beliefs in schools without allowing pupils or staff to opt out of that teaching is quite possibly illegal, and similarly, staff cannot be forced to adhere to the Steiner ethos, unless the schools legally designate as having a religious character (which they have not).

As opt-out rights have not been established at the Steiner Academies, and as parents do not have a legal right to not have their child sent to one of these schools, it seems that the Academies are open to someone challenging the curriculum under article 2 of protocol 1. The fact that it would be difficult for Steiner schools to alter their curriculum to allow someone to opt out of the philosophical parts of the curriculum seems to us not to be an argument in favour of the DfE ignoring its legal obligations, but in favour of it not providing state funding for schools from these two groups.

It would also not be a good solution to allow unhappy parents to decide to remove their children from the school entirely, and have them go to a different school: this would increase segregation within the school system, may not always be practical (there may not always be places at other schools available) and (even if it is possible) would not be efficient from a resources point of view.

The BHA made these points to the Government in 2012. Subsequently the DfE amended the Free School application guidance to acknowledge that Steiner (and Maharishi) schools have human rights obligations: 'If you are applying to set up a faith ethos Free School, a school designated as having a religious character, or one with a particularly distinctive educational philosophy and worldview, show how the needs of all children are fully provided for within the education plan.' And 'If you are proposing a school with a particularly distinctive educational philosophy or worldview, you must: Show how the school will attract pupils from all parts of the local community; and Demonstrate how you have engaged actively with parents not previously familiar with your curriculum model in establishing demand for your school... A distinctive educational philosophy or worldview would include Steiner and Maharishi.'⁶⁴

Not only does this not address the scale of the problem, but subsequent versions of the guidance have in fact removed these statements.⁶⁵

United States: It is worth noting that the situation set out here is in stark contrast to that in the United States. PLANS (People for Legal and Nonsectarian Schools) took a long-running legal case from 1998 to 2012 against the state funding of Steiner charter schools (charter schools being the US equivalent of Academies or Free Schools), alleging that the schools were essentially religious (and hence, due to the strict separation of church and state, should not be funded). The case was dismissed in 2012.⁶⁶ Ironically, therefore, while the US Steiner movement has worked hard not to be identified as a religion, due to the advantageous nature of not having such identification, the UK movement has happily self-identified as a philosophical belief system, due to that being the advantageous position here.

⁶⁴ DfE, 'Free Schools in 2014 How to apply Mainstream and 16 to 19 Free Schools', 2012: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/how%20to%20apply%20guidance%20mainstream%20free%20school%202014.pdf>

⁶⁵ The most recent being https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/270045/free_schools_how_to_apply_guide_updated_november_2013.pdf

⁶⁶ See <http://www.waldorfcritics.org/index.html> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PLANS>

Just how did Steiner schools gain state funding?

Woods Report: In 2005 the Government commissioned the *Woods Report* in order to explore the Steiner sector in England.⁶⁷ The document was written by known supporters of Steiner schools, including Glenys Woods, who has in the past been part of the anthroposophical movement,⁶⁸ and whose website describes how 'Glenys's spiritual path has led to her participation in numerous spiritual workshops and to her initiation as a Priestess of Shekinah and of Divine Mother Sophia, into the Order of Lord Melchizadek and The Violet Flame, and into the work of the Grandmothers (Net of Light). She is a Reiki Master (Atlantean and Crystal) and has been trained in Angelic Reiki Healing, Crystal Skull healing and other methods. Glenys does absent healing, as well as contact healing, which includes animals.'⁶⁹ The document is candid about the widespread beliefs in the spiritual world, karma and reincarnation, with the Information Network on Religious Movements (INFORM) summarising, 'The report also includes differences which are not made explicit on the group's own websites. For example: the role of the teacher understood as a sacred task in helping each child's soul and spirit grow; curriculum activities undertaken for their value in developing the child's soul qualities, not for their potential future utility.'⁷⁰

However, the document is also supportive of Steiner schools gaining state funding, going as far as to give detailed recommendations of what would have to change for that to happen (for example, 'Government to facilitate disapplication of Steiner schools from the requirements of the National Curriculum.')

Steiner Academy Hereford: Following on from this it was proposed to establish the Steiner Academy Hereford, on the site of the existing private Hereford Waldorf School, which would close. How the Government came to support such a plan is unknown. The school was opposed by most of the local population and the council, yet as the Guardian reported:⁷¹

'Dr Eddie Oram... was director of education for Herefordshire until he retired in 2004. The idea was first mooted on Oram's watch, and he turned it down because there was no shortage of primary places and he did not think the Steiner staff had the right expertise to deal with pupils with individual needs.

'But he knew the government was trying to place a Steiner academy in several other areas, whose education authorities, like him, had turned it down, and eventually, he says, the government's Academies Unit sent an emissary to twist his arm: former chief education officer for Cornwall, Jonathan Harris. Harris told him, Oram says, that "though the council's view would be listened to, disagreement would not be allowed to frustrate the government plans to meet its intentions under the diversity agenda."

'Oram was horrified. He pointed out that the Steiner school is located miles away from the socially disadvantaged parts of the county, where a number of schools needed replacement buildings, which could not be afforded because the county does not have the money.

⁶⁷ Philip Woods, Martin Ashley and Glenys Woods, *Steiner Schools in England*, DfE, 7 June 2005: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR645.pdf>

⁶⁸ <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1364436970020204#.UwYASFCqWRZ>

⁶⁹ <http://freespirtedu.org/Spiritual.html>

⁷⁰ Information Network on New Religious Movements' report on Steiner schools circa 2012: <http://www.inform.ac/>

⁷¹ Francis Beckett, 'Protests over plans for new Steiner academy', *The Guardian*, 10 March 2008: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2008/mar/10/schools.uk2>

Herefordshire is one of the worst-funded education authorities in Britain. But Harris told him that academy funding could not be transferred to the county's other priorities.'

Free Schools: We'll discuss how Michael Gove and the Free Schools team came to support Steiner schools in the next section, but suffice to say that prior to the election, the SWSF was getting very excited about the possibility of the free schools programme. In November 2009 it held a meeting, 'Moving forward, a special pre-election seminar about possible developments in the state funding opportunity for Steiner schools', with Rachel Wolf, director of the New Schools Network, and Sam Freedman, Michael Gove's special advisor.⁷² The meeting set out the Conservatives' support for funding Steiner Free Schools. It discussed issues to do with racism, but this was only seen as a PR problem, which Sam Freedman emphasised the SWSF would have to carefully manage. 'Rachel Wolf stated that she would be happy to offer the Steiner schools Fellowship free media training to prepare them for tackling the PR problems.'

Subsequently, 15 Steiner groups, 13 of them existing private schools, applied to open Free Schools in the first wave of the programme. All were rejected, perhaps reflecting concerns around these schools' past public statements.

Steiner Academy Frome: A further seven applications were submitted the following year (i.e. 2012 opening), with only one already being a private school. Another, Steiner Academy Frome, was approved to open. The school was down the road from the Meadow School in Bruton, an existing private Steiner school that was struggling with pupil numbers. Indeed it was a parent from this school who first proposed the Frome Academy.⁷³ When the Frome Academy opened, the Bruton school shut down.

Steiner Academy Frome's impact assessment reveals that it was opposed by most of the local population, by the Council, by neighbouring schools and by the NHS Trust.⁷⁴ However, these concerns were dismissed: concerns about over-provision from the Council and schools were not relevant due to 'the importance of parental choice and of bringing a diversity of education into the area, when at the moment the only Steiner option nearby is a fee paying independent school... Steiner Academy Frome will have a separate ethos from schools in the area and offers something different to the faith schools, of which there are several in the primary and middle phases. It has a distinct philosophy which means parents will bring their children to the school from a wider catchment area than the Somerset average'.

Steiner Academy Exeter: Exeter Steiner School was one of the existing private schools that submitted a funding application in the first wave of the free schools programme. The school also cited Richter and Rawson as the basis of its curriculum. The school had also, in the past had a homeopathy drop-in clinic for students,⁷⁵ and ran a homeopathy course for parents.⁷⁶ The school

⁷² The minutes somehow entered the public domain and are at

<http://ukanthroposophy.wordpress.com/2010/03/15/seminarnotes/>

⁷³ Tim Wigmore, 'The quiet country lane hosting a schooling revolution', *The Spectator*, 14 September 2012:

<http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2012/09/the-quiet-country-lane-hosting-a-schooling-revolution/>

⁷⁴ DfE, Steiner Academy Frome impact assessment:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251414/Steiner_Academy_Frome_-_Impact_Assessment_2012.pdf

See also <https://humanism.org.uk/2013/10/22/first-steiner-free-school-opened-despite-opposition-local-population-schools-council-nhs-trust/>

⁷⁵ Exeter Steiner School Friday Flier, 10 September 2010: <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ESS-Friday-Flier-100910.pdf>

⁷⁶ Exeter Steiner School Friday Flier, 15 June 2012: <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ESS-Friday-Flier-150612.pdf>

had also had anti-vaccine talks for parents, including one called ‘How to strengthen your immune system—is immunisation necessary?’ by a ‘Celebrated nutritionist and alternative therapist... about how we can boost our immune system naturally. The discussion will also cover the issue of childhood vaccinations.’⁷⁷ The school had an anthroposophical Doctor and an anthroposophical study group.⁷⁸

The private school proposed to become a Free School as part of the ‘first wave’, opening from 2011. After this proposal was rejected a parents’ meeting was organised at the school to discuss what to do next. The conclusion, reported in the parents’ newsletter, was that ‘The proposal is that Jenny and Dimitra will lead a proposal for the creation of a new state funded Steiner school in Exeter, catering for children from 4 – 16 (state school years Reception – 10)’⁷⁹ – i.e. a brand new Academy being proposed by people involved in the existing Academy. We can speculate that much like in Frome, this would stop the schools’ history of pseudoscience presenting any barriers to its gaining state funding. It was also proposed that the existing private school would stay open, but become a nursery.

Subsequent newsletters of the private school make it clear that it was quite involved in the Free School campaign.⁸⁰ Shortly after the Academy was approved, the private school effectively closed down, becoming the ‘The Children's Garden Early Years Steiner Education and Family Centre.’ Much as with the Meadow school, the private school’s website was promptly deleted.

Steiner Academy Bristol: Finally, Steiner Academy Bristol is due to open in September 2014. There is already a Bristol Steiner School, but it’s on the opposite side of the city, so the intention is to keep both schools open.

How Michael Gove and the DfE’s Free Schools team came to support Steiner schools

Michael Gove: Central to understanding how Michael Gove came to support Steiner schools are the Rees-Mogg family. Emma Craigie is daughter of former *Times* editor William Rees-Mogg, sister of Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg and sister of 2010 Conservative parliamentary candidate for Somerton and Frome, Annunziata Rees-Mogg (a constituency which includes Bruton). Craigie worked for the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, including in getting the Hereford Academy open.

In May 2009, Annunziata invited Michael Gove to Bruton to visit the Meadow Steiner School, with Emma also present. Subsequently to this, in July, Gove announced his support for Steiner schools gaining state funding, saying that ‘it was his visit to Somerset that had persuaded him of the potential benefits of allowing parents to choose a Steiner education.’⁸¹

⁷⁷ Exeter Steiner School Friday Flyer, 12 November 2010:

<http://www.freezepage.com/1347663399KTSMXEKVZY>

⁷⁸ Exeter Steiner School Parent Handbook 2011-12: <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Parent-handbook-Feb-12.pdf>

⁷⁹ Exeter Steiner School Friday Flyer, 16 December 2011:

<http://www.freezepage.com/1347663480LJOVSNNLFF>

⁸⁰ See e.g. <http://www.freezepage.com/1347663296PQXESVNDXX>,

<http://www.freezepage.com/1347663315BVBMMMAJCEQ>

⁸¹ ‘Meadow School influences new policy for small schools’, *Western Daily Press*, 17 July 2009:

<http://www.legacythisisdorset.co.uk/Meadow-School-influences-new-policy-small-schools/story-11762705-detail/story.html#ixzz2ggC4Soa8>

See also this article from Annunziata’s election website: <http://twitpic.com/60tqmt/full>

And this article by William Rees-Mogg: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1198992/WILLIAM-REES-MOGG-How-children-A-education.html>

Craigie was also in attendance at the aforementioned 'pre-election seminar', and it was the Steiner Academy Frome that was the first Steiner Free School to be approved (and the Meadow school which subsequently closed down).

The Free Schools team: In 2010, when the first Free Schools were being established, the Department for Education's Free Schools team did an investigation as to whether or not Steiner schools should gain state funding. This was different from an assessment of an individual Free School proposal – it was an assessment of a whole category of school. In 2012, the BHA gained reason to believe that because of some of the reasons set out in this document, this investigation concluded that Steiner schools should not gain state funding, but the Free Schools team were overruled.

As a consequence, in order to confirm whether or not this is true, the BHA put in a freedom of information request to the DfE for this investigation document, and when this was rejected,⁸² complained to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). On 9 December 2013, the ICO ruled that the DfE was wrong to withhold the document, and ordered it to be released.⁸³ On 21 January, the DfE appealed this decision to the Information Tribunal.⁸⁴ The BHA is has been added as a party to the case.

Conclusion

We are deeply concerned about the state funding of Steiner schools, in particular due to the pseudoscientific nature of the curriculum, the alternative medicine used by the schools, and the opting out of vaccinations. We are also worried by notions that Michael Gove overruled the Free Schools team on this matter. We will be pushing for the release of the document detailing that investigation, and hope to provoke further public debate on the matter.

⁸² On the grounds that it is related to the formulation or development of Government policy, and that the public interest lies against disclosure.

⁸³ <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013-12-09-ICO-decision-notice-on-Maharishi-and-Steiner-schools.pdf>

⁸⁴ Now also on the grounds that it would damage the commercial interests of both the state funded and independent Steiner schools, and that one small portion of it is subject to legal professional privilege.