

March 2009

**British Humanist Association Response to the Consultation on 21st Century
Schools**

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity representing and supporting people who seek to lead good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. Since its foundation the BHA has been involved in education. It currently campaigns against religious discrimination school admissions and employment and for an end to compulsory collective worship. The BHA supports the teaching of a broad-based religious education syllabus in various ways, including through its membership of organisations such as the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, through humanist representation on SACREs and by producing materials for RE teachers. The BHA is also involved at a local and national level in work supporting equality and diversity and participates in many forums which bring together people of different religions or beliefs.

Because of our interest in schools and the varied communities that they serve, we are pleased to be able to respond to the consultation on a system of 21st century schools. We have decided to limit our answers to those questions where we have particular expertise and have therefore chosen not to respond to the consultation on the School Report Card.

1. Do you support the overall vision of a 21st century school system in paragraphs 2.1 - 2.12?

We agree with the broad vision outlined in the proposals. In particular, we are enthusiastic about the idea that schools should work in partnership with each other, with parents and with the local community and a model of partnership between schools in admissions would be especially welcome. We also agree that meeting the needs of diverse pupils must be a high priority and that schools can make important contributions towards local cohesion. We query whether these laudable aims can be achieved without significant reform to the way that schools with a religious ethos operate.

5. What additional support is needed to enable schools to extend their role in developing sustainable and cohesive communities (paragraphs 3.20-3.24)?

We wholly support the idea that schools are a resource for the whole community and that they have a key role in shaping society for the future. Because of this we are disappointed that the schools paper and consultation document do not directly tackle the issues around “faith schools”, which often engage

only selectively with their local communities due to restrictions on their admissions, employment and curriculum.

We understand that some schools with a religious character do try to engage with the whole community and that the duty to promote community cohesion will go some way to encourage further progress. However, no amount of school twinning projects will overcome the barrier posed by admission practices that discriminate by belief. Furthermore, there is a risk that some schools will prioritise building links with other schools and organisations of their religious background to the potential detriment of community cohesion.

For schools to be at the centre of their community they should be open to all those who live in the area. We also believe that a national curriculum for RE, or at least the requirement that all schools follow the locally agreed syllabus, is necessary to ensure that all students leave school with an understanding of the full range of beliefs held in Britain. The present situation in which it is possible for RE to be taught entirely from the perspective of the school's denomination weakens the ability of schools to develop cohesive communities.

8. a) What are the main challenges to the children and young people's workforce in delivering the vision of the 21st century school (paragraphs 4.13-4.16)?

One of the challenges facing the schools workforce in the 21st century is the continuing ability of schools with a religious character to discriminate against teaching and non-teaching staff according to their beliefs. The effect of this on individuals can be very serious: we hear cases of individuals who feel that they have to hide or play down their personal beliefs if working in a faith school and others who have opportunities for employment and promotion blocked because they are of the "wrong" religion, or do not have religious beliefs. These issues can be particularly acute in rural areas which have few community schools, as well as in a number of inner cities, such as London and Liverpool. Teachers applying for leadership posts are most adversely affected as these are most likely to be restricted.

The other impact of putting religious requirements on senior teaching posts at faith schools is that it limits the pool of possible applicants, with the consequence that many schools struggle to appoint senior staff or appoint less well qualified candidates, as shown by the 23rd *Annual Report of Senior Staff Appointments* by Education Data Surveys.

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