

BHA BRIEFING 2010: Children, Schools and Families Bill.

Lords 2nd Reading

Monday 8th March

Briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA): Reforming Religious Education in England

Background

RE is compulsory for all pupils in state schools in England, but it is not on the National Curriculum. Instead, most maintained schools follow an 'agreed syllabus' set by their local authority responsible for Education called an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC). The teaching of the local syllabus is monitored by a local authority's Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACRE). The membership of both ASCs and SACREs comprise of representatives from religious groups, the local authority and local school teachers.

Voluntary-aided (VA) faith schools, unlike other maintained schools, are not obliged to follow the locally agreed syllabus, but can instead draw up their own. The quality and breadth of the RE taught in VA schools varies. However, these schools can teach RE that is instructional and also narrow, which does not cover non-religious and other religious perspectives. The Church of England's own guidance¹ on RE describes beliefs of those who do not believe in a non-material world as 'ultimately sterile' (p6), while it also notes that RE has a duty 'to nourish those of faith; to encourage those of other faiths; to challenge those who have no faith' (p4).

The government produced new non-statutory guidance² on RE in English schools in January 2010. While it reinforced the government's view that local syllabus RE should cover non-religious perspectives, it did not state that this is what the laws requires. It also did not make clear that humanists should be full members of ASCs and SACREs, like representatives of religious groups.

What do we want?

The BHA has long argued that RE should become a National Curriculum subject for all state schools. The provision of RE and the content of RE syllabuses across the country is of patchy quality and a postcode lottery. National Curriculum RE would help to raise standards and provide pupils with a much firmer entitlement to good RE. It would also help address the current problem that RE teachers and pupils experience when they move between schools in different local authority areas or/and between schools that follow either their own or the local syllabus.

Making RE part of the National Curriculum would provide an opportunity to ensure that all RE was genuinely educational (as opposed to confessional), as well as impartial, fair and balanced, while also provide an obvious opportunity for the Government to clarify the current law surrounding RE and remove any ambiguity.

The BHA believes that this Bill is a missed opportunity to put RE on a sounder statutory footing by means of including it in the National Curriculum.

For more information, please contact Paul Pettinger, Education Campaigns Officer, on paul@humanism.org.uk or 020 7462 4991.

¹ *Excellence and distinctiveness; Guidance on RE in Church of England schools* (2005). Available at: <http://www.natsoc.org.uk/downloads/edoct05.doc>

² *Religious education in English schools: Non-statutory guidance 2010* (2010). Available at: <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/doc/14671/Religious%20education%20guidance%20in%20English%20schools%202010.pdf>