

BHA BRIEFING 2010: Academies Bill, Lords 2nd Reading

Monday 7th June

Briefing from the British Humanist Association on the Academies Bill for Lords 2nd Reading

The Academies Bill

The Academies Bill represents a step-change in policy, allowing for the first time high-performing, state-maintained schools automatically to become Academies – state-funded but independent schools. This is a departure from current policy, where schools close to be replaced by Academies, or a new Academy school is built following consultation by the local authority.

A third of Academies already have religious sponsors, some of which are highly evangelical and extreme in their positions. Some of the discriminatory and counter-educational practices permitted to state-funded religious Academies are discrimination in admissions and employment, and complete freedom over the curriculum. There is also the additional risk that a religious Academy may use public money for the promotion of religion.

Why is this Bill different?

The Academies Bill forces a state-maintained school with a religious character – a “faith school” – automatically to become an independent school with that religious character, without any analogous guarantee that community schools becoming Academies will also be secular and inclusive. Voluntary-controlled state schools with a religious character, if they wish to become Academies, will be forced to become religious Academies, even if they want to become inclusive community schools, leaving parents and pupils dramatically less protected from discrimination than at present.

Unlike present policy, there is no need for a sponsor and this process will happen without public consultation. For the first time, primary schools will also be able to apply to become Academies in their own right.

It is not clear whether thousands of high-performing inclusive community schools, which do not have a religious character, could apply to become religious Academies and begin discriminating in employment, admissions and curriculum.

This Bill is a massive de-regulation of public education, which provides no protection for children against unsound education in religious interests, increases the amount of money paid by the public to religious schools, and permanently removes the possibility for state-funded religious schools to become inclusive community schools.

Employment

Academy / independent schools with a religious character have a different status in law to other state-maintained “faith schools”. It is not clear what effect this Bill will have on the employment status of hundreds of teachers, teaching assistants and non-teaching staff who are currently employed by “faith schools” that become Academies, or of those applying for jobs in those schools.

Our particular concern is that, for some schools, the new employment policies may impose new or much wider religious restrictions on their employment, discriminating against current and potential staff on grounds of their beliefs and behaviour, in and outside of the school context. We do not believe that such restrictions can be justified.

Curriculum

Once a state-maintained “faith school” has become a religious Academy, it does not need to follow the national curriculum. We know from experience that there are curriculum and teaching concerns specific to existing Academy schools with religious sponsors. For example, since early 2002, the BHA was at the forefront of bringing the teaching of creationism in Academies to public attention. We have also continued to have serious concerns about the extreme religious agenda of some religious organisations in control of state-funded Academies, and the lower level discrimination operated by the less extreme religious organisations.

These concerns apply to the new schools created under this Bill, and important questions are raised. For example, would a new, state-funded, Catholic Academy be allowed not to teach sexual reproduction in biology lessons, let alone wider and objective sex and relationships education? Nothing in the new, deregulated system proposed by this Bill would prohibit this.

The potential for religious authorities to have very restrictive teaching in line with their religious ethos is even greater in Academy schools which have largely unrestricted curricula.

We want protections to ensure that new Academies will not be able to teach creationism, unbalanced religious education, have narrow and subjective religious teaching across their curricula.

Primary schools

This Bill is likely to have the most profound effect on primary schools. Around a third of all state-funded schools are “faith schools”, with the majority of those being primary schools¹. For the first time, this Bill will permit those primary schools which are high-performing to become state-funded religious Academies / independent schools with a religious character.

We are deeply concerned that the education of primary-school-age children may be severely and negatively impacted by the effects of this Bill, which would lift many state-funded faith schools, into a largely unregulated sector, with no public consultation and no entitlement of children to the national curriculum.

About us

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity representing and supporting the non-religious and campaigning for an end to religious privilege and discrimination based on religion or belief. Committed to human rights, democracy, equality and mutual respect, the BHA works for an open and inclusive society with freedom of belief and speech.

For more detail and evidence on our position, please contact us:

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¹ DCSF statistics in 2008 on religion and school status find primary schools with a religious character make up nearly 40% of all primary schools in England. <http://www.accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Dossier-of-Independent-Evidence-on-Faith-Schools.pdf>