



Response to Consultation on Non-Statutory Guidance for Religious Education

Introduction

The Catholic Education Service for England and Wales (CESEW) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Draft Non-Statutory Guidance (2009) for Religious Education in English Schools. Religious Education in schools has never been a more important priority. We know from examination entries and various sources of evidence that Religious Education is a very popular subject and one in which there continues to be growing interest. Furthermore, in the light of the current issues facing our society, the public debate on religion and faith, and the need to ensure learning about and learning from religion, Religious Education is a critical national issue. In commenting on the draft Guidance, CESEW does so mindful of the fact that the Non-statutory Guidance **will not** apply to our Catholic Voluntary Aided schools which number over 2,000. In turn, we do not expect it to impact on the content, organisation and inspection of Religious Education in Catholic schools. However, we have many Catholic pupils in other maintained schools and our interest in the Guidance is in response to our concern for them and for the well being of our wider society which needs to benefit from excellent Religious Education teaching in schools. We also acknowledge that good guidance and rigorous curricula for Religious Education, together with sufficient well qualified teachers, are a strategic part of building the nation's confidence in the value of Religious Education and will help to debunk myths about the way in which it is taught. For these reasons we contribute our response willingly, drawing upon our community's commitment to and expertise in Religious Education.

Overview

We note that DCSF sought to consult widely before publishing the draft Guidance and we welcomed the setting up of the joint DCSF/Religious Education Council Steering Group which was jointly chaired and from which the draft Guidance emanates. The fact that this group noted the 'dual system' and that this is evidenced in the Guidance is to be welcomed. We would hope that a brief but clear explanation of the dual system will be included in the final Guidance so that all may better understand the system and to whom the Guidance, therefore, applies. We welcome also the fact that the Guidance has made clear the importance of the contribution that Religious Education makes to the personal development of pupils, and

specifically to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. We also note that the contribution of Religious Education to wider society and, in particular, to promoting community cohesion has been referenced. However, we wish to see more precision exercised in relation to explaining the *raison d'être* of Religious Education, ie it is valuable of itself; it is also valuable for its contribution to personal development and human flourishing and is valuable for the knowledge and understanding that it develops in the student that contributes to community cohesion, rather than Religious Education having as its purpose the promotion of community cohesion.

We welcome the unequivocal statement in the draft that:

“It remains the responsibility of the school at which a student is registered to ensure that the student receives the Religious Education to which he or she is statutorily entitled”.

Given the implementation of 14-19 policies and the impact that these have on the locations where young people may be undertaking some of their learning, whatever their place of registration, it is critically important that this responsibility of the home, school or sixth form college to ensure appropriate Religious Education be upheld and endorsed. We would welcome even stronger guidance that this responsibility will require careful collaboration between the providers of education 14-19 and a willingness on the part of many to understand the rights and responsibilities that schools with a religious character have to ensure that their pupils receive their due entitlement; a responsibility eagerly and willingly undertaken by Catholic schools but one which is not always given due regard by other planners and providers.

We call for the final Guidance to be clear about the place of teaching about humanism in Religious Education. Whilst it is right that pupils should understand that there are many points of view to respect in regard to religious, non-religious belief and non belief, the teaching of humanism as equivalent to faith and religion has no place in Religious Education. Humanism is a secular philosophy and more may also be learned about it in other parts of the curriculum but it should not be taking time from learning about and learning from religion as is intended in Religious Education.

Whilst we are able to welcome much of the content of the draft we do have a number of concerns which we raise specifically below, but one which we wish to flag very prominently is that the draft Guidance does not do justice to the place of religion in the lives of people of faith. Religion is a constituent element of society, historically and now, because people of faith seek to live by their faith and it is therefore wrong to view religion as an ‘external’ impacting upon society; it is integral to the very nature of society. Yet the Guidance says, for example, that there are varying impacts of religion on society (1.2.3) and speaks of “how society is influenced by beliefs, teaching and guidance from religious leaders and sacred texts” (3.2). We suggest that this depiction is inadequate.

Before making specific comments on the draft text we should note that we found the draft a hard one to work with in places because the document seems not to have been rigorously proof read and so, for example, there is a duplication of references and there are other inconsistencies and errors but we travel hopefully and assume that all such problems will be ironed out before publication!

Specific Comments on Text of Draft Non-Statutory Guidance (2009) for Religious Education in Schools in England.

- i) Religious Education is important in its own right as a discipline and mode of understanding humanity and reality. We urge that the final Guidance should state this unequivocally rather than letting an arguably utilitarian view of Religious Education pervade. For example, in Chapter 3 the importance of Religious Education is argued on the grounds that “religious education plays an essential role ... in the school’s duty to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and of society and to prepare pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life” (3.1). We urge that a much richer and appropriate description of the intrinsic value of Religious Education, whether for believers or non-believers, features in the Guidance.
- ii) We have concerns about paragraph 3.1 and its inadequate representation of the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (Toledo Principles). The statement in the Guidance that “Religious Education should be taught in an objective and pluralistic manner and not as indoctrination into a particular faith or belief” sounds to have been lifted incompletely from the Toledo Guiding Principles, and without adequate reference to these. The Toledo Principles acknowledge that there are many complexities in the teaching of Religious Education. They note (page 69) that “in the strict sense, no course – whether on religion or any other subject – is absolutely neutral or objective.” This is a view which we would strongly endorse, noting that nothing in life is value free. Regrettably, society seems now to speak of values as though all values have equal merit – as though values are of themselves always good. One only has to think of values espoused by the Nazi party and even in certain other political parties of today to know that not all values are worthy of respect. The Toledo Principles rightly reference the difference between schools that are the exclusive responsibility of the State and other schools which may be public and also have a “particular religious or ideological orientation”. It goes on to state that “religious autonomy rights should be respected”, noting that the particular ethos of a school should be taken into account. Therefore, it can be seen that the Draft Guidance is being disingenuous in its current incomplete reference to the Toledo Principles and should make more mention of the distinctiveness of schools with a religious character and their entitlement to pursue confessional Religious Education.
- iii) There is concern that the draft uses some terminology such as “pluralistic” and “objective” in ways consonant with their usage in the 1970s and thereabouts. This terminology needs to be reconsidered and specialist terms explained in an up-to-date way reflecting where Religious Education in schools now is in terms of its development.
- iv) We are concerned about the reference to “concept of religion” in 3.1. There is a danger that this will be read in a technical sense of ‘Key Concept’ as in ‘New Secondary Curriculum Religious Education Programme of Study (non-

statutory): key stage 3'. Given that in the Rose Review of the Primary Curriculum, the term 'Key Concept' has been replaced with 'Essential Knowledge', we therefore urge that care be taken to ensure that there is no confusion in the use of such terminology as a concept of religion and that, wherever possible, language used is appropriate in the light of other educational developments such as the Rose Review.

- v) Chapter 4 needs to be reworked in order to be clearer that the non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education is not a requirement upon Voluntary Aided schools with a religious character. Statements made in paragraphs 4.1 and 4.2 and a quotation from *Faith In The System* are potentially confusing when read within Non-statutory Guidance for Religious Education. We, the Catholic community, were supportive of aspects of the Non-statutory Guidance as an instrument and principles which would help people to plan, deliver and evaluate their programmes of Religious Education but we hold firmly to the statement issued by CESEW following the launch of the Framework when we explained that:

“the *non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education* needs to be read in conjunction with the Bishops' Conference *Curriculum Directory for Catholic Schools, 1996*. The latter outlines the content and scope of what is taught in Religious Education in Catholic schools and colleges. The aim of this teaching in Catholic schools is to promote knowledge and understanding of Catholic life and faith, along with an understanding of the purpose of faith to ultimate questions about human life, its origin and purpose. The educational principles of how this is achieved in Religious Education are consistent whatever the nature of the school. Within a Catholic school teaching is rooted firmly within our tradition while remaining open to an awareness of the tenets of other faiths.”

We hold firmly to this position and seek assurances that the Guidance will make abundantly clear that the new non-statutory Guidance will not, inadvertently or otherwise, undermine what we do or mislead others on this matter.

- vi) We recognise the situation described in the Guidance when it draws attention to the variability in the quality of partnership between Local Authorities and their SACREs and we support efforts to clarify the obligations of the parties involved, to ensure adequate resourcing for SACREs and to address the issue of ensuring adequate information for SACREs to discharge their responsibilities. However, we are far from convinced that the draft Guidance achieves the necessary clarity or that it will prompt the necessary action to strengthen SACREs and help them to be consistently effective. We would also wish to see the ambiguity about who should be included in membership of SACREs better addressed.
- vii) We are disappointed in the text of Chapter 7 which seems to give a less than ringing endorsement for Religious Education. Rather than what seemed a rather wishy-washy discussion about the frequency of Religious Education in the timetable and a focus on meeting statutory requirements, we would want to see a positive encouragement to give Religious Education a prominent

position in the curriculum with the benefit of regular and frequent timetabling for a sufficient period of time. In Catholic schools, for example, 10% of curriculum time is expected to be given to Religious Education up to the end of Year 11 and 5% in Years 12 and 13.

Conclusion

We hope that the concluding work on the proposed non-statutory Guidance will satisfactorily respond to the issues that we have raised. We hope that the Guidance will strike a very positive and encouraging note throughout and that it will be more persuasive about the intrinsic value of Religious Education, representing learning about religion but also with a greater emphasis on learning from religion. We look forward to the final non-statutory Guidance being a means to ensuring that all pupils in maintained schools receive their entitlement to high quality Religious Education throughout their school careers.

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