

Evolution “problematic” for Orthodox Jewish ‘faith schools’

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Government plans to place greater emphasis on evolution in biology classes as part of its proposals to reform GCSE content have been criticised for "causing problems" for strictly Orthodox Jewish faith schools.

The criticism followed last week's publication of subject content proposals for Biology by the Department for Education. Under the new proposals students would be required to describe how evolution occurs; evaluate the evidence for evolution to include fossils; describe the work of Darwin and Wallace in the development of evolution theory; and explain the impact of evolution on modern biology.

Speaking to the Jewish Chronicle, Michael Cohen, an adviser to Orthodox schools, said: "I don't see Charedi [ultra-Orthodox] schools going along with it. It is something that flies in face of their ethos and culture. It is clear this kind of proposal is definitely going to create difficulties for Charedi schools."

According to the Jewish Chronicle, modern Orthodox schools feel able to reconcile evolution with Jewish teachings on creation but Charedi schools regard it as opposed to traditional doctrine. There is currently just one Charedi Jewish school in the state sector.

Unconfirmed reports on the internet have suggested that a question deemed unsuitable by Charedi teachers in a GSCE science exam this year was blacked out for pupils who sat it.

Rabbi Avraham Pinter, principal of the state funded Chasidic girls' secondary school, Yesodey Hatorah, told the Jewish Chronicle: "sometimes Charedi schools, if they find anything in the paper which could be offensive to parents, advise children to avoid that question".

He said that he expected Charedi concerns to be raised in consultations about the reforms. "We are confident that the government will take into consideration the educational priorities of parents and children of all faiths, and ensure that this topic is covered in a balanced and sensitive manner."

The National Secular Society believes the proposals could be problematic for other 'faith schools' within the state system.

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager of the National Secular Society, said: "The danger with faith schools is that religion can so often become a big part of the educational provision. Many faith schools make a point of ensuring that the 'religious ethos' permeates through all lessons – including science.

"When scientific facts are incompatible with the faith of the school, too often it will be the children's education that is compromised, rather than the faith of the school. Parents do have a right to educate their children in accordance with their religious convictions, but the inclusion of faith schools in our state education system results in the state becoming complicit in the inculcation of children with religious beliefs – something the state should play no part in."

Last year the Department for Education announced plans to make evolution a compulsory part of the primary school curriculum. The National Association of Jewish Orthodox Schools has since lobbied the department for a rethink.

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