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A response to Sex and Relationships Guidance to Schools

by the National Secular Society

Deadline 19 April 2010

Date submitted: 15 April 2010

To:

Consultation Unit

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Introduction

The NSS welcomes the proposal to make SRE part of the curriculum in all schools and that it will be 'factually accurate, evidence-based and age appropriate'. We commend the mention of the fact that 'none of the abstinence-focused programmes had a positive impact' (p13). The teenage pregnancy rate in the UK is the highest in Europe – one in 25 under 18 year olds – and STI rates are climbing. It is essential that young people are given the facts as early as possible so that they can protect themselves while exploring, enjoying and taking responsibility for their sexuality.

However, there are certain concerns about the proposed guidance and its intention to be 'sensitive to faith and cultural perspectives' and to the 'ethos of the school'.

Although there is currently no complete opt-out permitted to schools, the fact that governing bodies will retain the right to determine the schools' approach to SRE may not be serving the best interests of young people and may in some cases be placing them at risk.

The NSS is also concerned that parents can withdraw children from SRE up to the age of 15, by which time many of them will already be sexually active. It is most likely to be strongly religious parents who withdraw children. The guidance itself notes that *SRE is more effective if it starts before a young person first has sex* (p14).

Comments on the Guidance

Our specific concerns are as follows:

Section 2.2.1

There are clear values that underpin SRE including:

- *the value of family life, marriage and of loving and stable relationships in bringing up children.*

No mention is specifically made of civil partnerships or of gay relationships in general. For schools with a strongly religious ethos, it would be too easy to use this directive literally, defining 'family life' in narrow terms and focussing only on marriage. Some religious groups oppose adoption by gay couples; the guidance should explicitly mention committed non-heterosexual relationships as equally important for raising children.

At the very least, the NSS recommends that the wording be changed to:

'the value of family life and of loving, committed relationships in bringing up children'

It is essential that, while young people are taught about stable relationships (of all kinds), they are also prepared to embark on casual relationships safely. In some religious schools, teaching may be biased by the selective use of facts or morally loaded against casual sex and short-term relationships, leaving young people unprepared to protect themselves. They may be ill-informed or too embarrassed to buy contraceptives or to consult health-care professionals about STIs or pregnancy. They may also be unprepared and vulnerable if they discover they are gay.

The values in SRE are consistent with the values underpinning the National Curriculum, which aims to enable all children and young people to become (...) and which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of learners. (p10)

The NSS is concerned that spiritual teaching will be mixed with fact-based SRE, giving young people a mixed message, weighting facts with moral overtones or suggesting that morality is derived from religious values. There is also the potential for creating a conflict between faith values, sexuality and sexual orientation, leaving children isolated and open to victimization or bullying.

Section 2.6.1

Parents have a legal right to withdraw their children from SRE taught outside of the science national curriculum – but if they choose to withdraw their children from school provision they have a responsibility to provide alternative SRE. The school's SRE policy should set out clearly how parents are informed of their right of withdrawal from SRE and how the school will support them in fulfilling their responsibility to provide SRE at home.

In strongly religious families, it is difficult to see how parents will be able to provide an adequate substitute for unbiased, fact-based education or how the quality of the information delivered by parents will be monitored by schools. The parents themselves may not be adequately educated in PSHE; they may not feel comfortable or able to give the children all the facts or to answer all their questions, even if schools provide information.

In addition, the child may come under considerable pressure from the family to conform to its beliefs. Young people may not know that what they have been told is inaccurate or partial until it is too late and they find themselves in difficulties with pregnancy or STIs.

The right of parents to lead the lives they choose is not a right to force their children lead the same lives. Younger children in particular often do not have the experience or the maturity to decide on what they believe – if anything. They may also not feel able to report back to the school on what their families have told them.

There is particular concern about young gay people in a religious family where homosexuality is not acceptable.

Section 3: PLANNING AND TEACHING EFFECTIVE SRE

*Effective SRE is dependent on partnerships at many levels; between parents, schools, children and young people – and at a more strategic level between the local authority, **local faith communities such as diocesan boards of education, PCTs and partners in children's services** (our bold). (p19)*

And

3.13 Leadership within the local authority (p49)

*Support and advice can also be sought from **dioceses** (Church of England and Roman Catholic) and the **appropriate local religious authorities**. (our bold)*

Faith leaders often claim to speak for the whole community whereas in reality, they represent only the most orthodox minority. The homogeneity of teaching by a particular faith community often does not reflect the many levels of beliefs of its members. It also does not allow for treating young people as individuals. There may be particular problems for young women and young gay people in communities where the leaders are all men and homosexuality is not approved of. Again, the conflict between faith and fact may leave children exposed.

3.1

Schools should make a clear distinction between factual information and views and beliefs.

It is not clear how this will be monitored or how religious views could be communicated in a neutral way, without biasing the facts. Nor, indeed, that staff in some schools are able to distinguish between evidence-based fact and religious belief. The relative weight given to fact and belief and the tone in which teaching is given may also shape young people's understanding.

Sensitivity to faith and cultural perspectives (p20)

Faith and cultural beliefs have an important role in shaping children and young people's views and decisions about sex and relationships.

We encourage all schools – whether of a religious character or not – to include the perspectives of a range of different faiths as part of the context for discussions about sex and relationships.

and

Promote equality, inclusion & acceptance of diversity (20)

SRE must be aware of and responsive to the diverse faith, cultural and family backgrounds of children and young people and also to the abilities, gender and sexual orientation of children and young people. SRE should promote awareness, respect and understanding for the wide range of practices and beliefs relating to sex and relationships within our society. Many people still face unacceptable prejudice and discrimination on the basis of their sexuality or what they look like, and intolerance towards difference needs to be challenged.

and

Promote strong and stable relationships (p21)

Teaching about relationships should reflect and draw on the faith and cultural background of pupils, their families and communities. Faith and cultural perspectives can provide a rich resource for exploring what constitutes strong relationships and the spiritual and moral dimensions of relationships.

There is no mention here of people who do not have any faith. There is also the implication that morality and spirituality are linked rather than religious-based morality being a subjective interpretation. There is no acknowledgement that the 'important role' of faith and cultural beliefs may have negative aspects.

There is no recognition of the fact that either parents have chosen to send their children to a particular faith school or have had no choice as only faith schools are available in their area. The child has had no say in the matter and the religious values of that school are therefore being imposed on them, often before they are old enough to make their own decisions.

It would be too easy for a school to mention alternative beliefs (and lack of them) only in passing or as lesser than their own – every religion does, after all, think it is the only true one.

Diversity will not be well served if the school's religious ethos is anti-homosexual, anti-choice or anti sex outside of marriage, for example, and any mention of acceptance is merely tokenism.

Section 3.10 (p45) Wider community engagement with SRE to meet the localised needs of children and young people

A key element to SRE is teaching children and young people how to assess risk, keep safe and how to get further information and help. A school's own ethos and religious beliefs will be a consideration when engaging with the increasing range of services that are based on the school-site. (...)Information about local services outside the school should also be included in SRE.

The NSS supports the initiative to make sure that young people are well informed but in the case of religious schools, it is unlikely that a Catholic school, for example, will inform young people where to get contraceptives or provide information about abortions. Very recently, Catholic schools were against young women having the HPV vaccine against cervical cancer as they said this would 'promote promiscuity'.

In some communities, young people may not feel able to use services such as pharmacies or sexual health clinics without their parents and others finding out. There may also be trust issues in strongly religious schools.

Conclusion

While the NSS recognises that some faith schools will provide young people with comprehensive, non-judgemental SRE, the guidance must ensure that all young people are equally well-informed and prepared, whatever the ethos of the school or the beliefs of their parents.

There must not be a hierarchy of values with religious belief inevitably taking precedence over health and well-being if the government seriously wants to prepare young people for adult life.

About the National Secular Society

The National Secular Society campaigns for a society in which everyone is free to practise their faith, change it or not have one, according to their conscience. Our beliefs or lack of them should not put us at an advantage or a disadvantage. Religion should be a matter of private conscience, for the home and place of worship; it must not have privileged input into politics, legislation, education or healthcare.

We fight to protect freedom of expression from attacks by religious groups, which often try to restrict debate or scrutiny of their activities.

We want to ensure that Human Rights do not lose out to religious rights, and to challenge the exemptions religious bodies are granted, or try to demand, from discrimination laws.