

Schools Minister writes to Rabbi over advice to avoid science questions at Jewish faith school

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The Minister for Schools, David Laws MP, has written to the principal of Yesodey Hatorah, an Orthodox Jewish school, after the National Secular Society raised concerns that the school was failing to teach the National Curriculum in full and advising pupils to not answer exam questions on evolution and human reproduction.

Both Ofsted and the Department for Education have now written to the National Secular Society regarding the Yesodey Hatorah Senior Girls School, after the NSS [raised concerns](#) that school leaders have a policy of instructing students not to answer "sensitive" exam questions, after previously redacting them from papers.

David Laws MP writing to the NSS, said that "it is unacceptable for any school to redact exam papers, because this denies pupils the opportunity to demonstrate their full potential across the curriculum they have been taught."

The Minister added that "Yesodey Hatorah School has previously assured the department that it will teach the National Curriculum in full, with certain topics taught in a sensitive manner to respect its pupils' religious beliefs and that it will not redact questions in exam papers. It is important that they honour these commitments."

The NSS wrote to the DfE and Ofsted after Rabbi Pinter, principle of Yesodey Hatorah, said that the school would no longer redact exam questions as they had in the past, and instead simply instruct students not to answer them when the subject matter conflicted with the school's strict, Orthodox Jewish ethos.

David Laws has now written to Rabbi Pinter, "seeking reassurance that his school remains committed to teaching the full National Curriculum, as well as important non-curricular subjects like PHSE and SRE." The Minister added that "I have also asked him to confirm whether pupils will be advised not to answer certain questions that may arise during next summer's examinations."

Ofsted, responding to the concerns of the NSS, wrote that during the school's last inspection by Ofsted, in September 2014, "inspectors considered the school's practice of redacting examination questions." According to the Ofsted letter, inspectors were aware that "there had been correspondence between the school and an examination board" which had privately authorised the school's practice of redacting questions, but that an understanding had now been reached that "the school's practice of redacting examination questions would no longer continue."

In response to our concerns about the teaching of science, Ofsted write that "the school made it clear that a creationist belief is taught within the Kodesh (Jewish faith) curriculum, but that students also know that there is another viewpoint."

The NSS also asked the schools regulator to investigate comments made by Rabbi Pinter indicating that he regards homosexuality as incompatible with the school's religious ethos. In response, Ofsted say their inspection report found students were "aware of different discriminatory forms of bullying, although there is no specific reference to homophobic bullying."

Despite indicating no plans to take action against the school, Ofsted have said that they will "take very seriously any first-hand evidence that this or any other school were continuing to redact examination questions, failing to teach the statutory science curriculum (including evolution and genetics), or failing to promote tolerance and respect for people from all cultures and lifestyles."

NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans, commented: "We were successful last year in ensuring the redaction of exam papers was considered malpractice, but the issue goes beyond the blacking out of certain questions. This time we raised concerns of a very specific nature, and fail to see how Ofsted's reference to their September report addresses them. In the responses from both Ofsted and the DfE, there seems to be an unwillingness to engage with the specific allegations.

"Young people's education should never be compromised when scientific facts happen to conflict with a school's religious outlook – and homosexuality shouldn't be 'incompatible' with the ethos of any of our publicly funded schools.

"Rabbi Pinter's comments clearly indicate that the intransigent attitude extends beyond exams and into science classes. It is inconceivable that the sensitivity over exam questions on religious grounds is not a symptom of science not being taught properly, particularly reproductive biology and evolution.

"If Rabbi Pinter is unable to confirm to the Minister for Schools that pupils are now taught the National Curriculum in full, and are free to answer all exam questions, then a much stronger line should be taken with this school – and indeed any others that allow their religious ethos to stand in the way of child's right to a broad and balanced education."

[The full background of the story can be found here.](#)

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