

NSS expresses support for RE and RSE reform in Wales

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The National Secular Society has expressed qualified support for proposed reforms to religious education and relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in Wales in response to two government consultations.

The responses came after the Welsh government [proposed](#) a new curriculum which would change the role of RE and said it would reconsider parents' right to withdraw children from RSE.

In January the Welsh government said it planned to make RE part of a humanities area of learning and experience (AoLE), along with history, geography and business and social studies.

It said "essential aspects of learning" would be outlined across each AoLE, rather than within individual subjects.

In its [response](#) the NSS wrote: "We broadly support the proposed moves towards a modern more inclusive RE curriculum that addresses the diversity of worldviews in Wales. It is good for this to be embedded in a wider humanities area of learning, rather than being treated as an exceptional area."

But the NSS criticised provisions which allow faith schools to continue to teach RE in accordance with their ethos and the retention of SACREs – local bodies which determine RE curricula.

The Welsh government's plans would see non-religious representatives admitted to SACREs. The NSS welcomed "efforts to make SACREs more inclusive" but said the influence of groups who wished to present their religion or belief in a positive light was "educationally inappropriate".

The NSS also said the parental right to withdraw children from RSE should be removed.

"Parents do not have a right to selectively withdraw their children from science or history lessons that may conflict with their religion or belief, and we argue that the same should hold true for RSE.

"The right of withdrawal is most likely to deny knowledge to children from conservative religious backgrounds, who most need impartial, appropriate education in this area. This can place both themselves and others at risk."

This week education minister Kirsty Williams [told](#) the BBC she was considering whether allowing parents to remove pupils from the lessons was "still appropriate".

The NSS expressed support in principle for the end of the right to withdraw from RE. But it added that the right should only end if it can "be guaranteed that RE is not promoting a particular view of religion".

The NSS said current guidance meant some parents had "legitimate concerns about RE being used to promote particular religious views or a positively biased view of religion".

The society added that older children who wished to overrule parents who opted them out of RE and RSE should have their opinions taken into account.

The NSS expressed disappointment that the proposals did not include plans to reform Wales's collective worship law.

The law in Wales currently provides that children at all maintained schools "shall on each school day take part in an act of collective worship". In community schools, the worship must be wholly or mainly of a Christian character.

In a separate [response](#) to guidance on RSE the NSS expressed concern that faith schools would continue to distort the way they taught about relationships and sexuality.

The guidance says education practitioners should be "aware of, and sensitive to, the personal circumstances of individual learners". It adds that this should enable them to "deliver suitable tailored content to the religious and cultural background of learners".

The NSS said this should not be allowed to interfere with schools' duty to deliver "a rights based, comprehensive and non-discriminatory RSE curriculum for all pupils, regardless of school or background".

In May 2018 NSS [research](#) exposed the way Wales's secondary state faith schools were distorting sex and relationships education (SRE) by teaching it through a religious lens. All 12 of those schools which had an SRE policy were teaching it within the tenets of Catholicism or the Church in Wales.

Shortly afterwards the NSS welcomed plans to make LGBT-inclusive RSE compulsory in Welsh schools from age five but [warned](#) against allowing faith schools to teach it on a religious basis.

The NSS's response on RSE also said education should not be considered less "age appropriate" depending on "the sexuality of examples used".

"If it is age appropriate for pupils to receive certain information about sex, it is age appropriate for them to receive this information about LGBT and non-LGBT sex. If it is age appropriate for pupils to receive certain information about relationships, it is age appropriate for them to receive this information about LGBT and non-LGBT relationships."

The NSS campaigns for an [impartial religion and belief curriculum](#), education about sex and relationships which is [free from religious influence](#) and an [end to compulsory worship](#) in schools.

The society has made the case for these reforms in meetings with Welsh education officials over the last two years.

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