

Religious pressure resisted as Welsh RE reform plans progress

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A major curriculum reform bill which would replace religious education with a more pluralistic alternative in Wales will proceed to the next parliamentary stage after a Senedd committee's recommendation.

The Children, Young People and Education Committee has recommended that the Senedd agree the general principles of the [Curriculum and Assessment \(Wales\) Bill](#).

The National Secular Society was among groups who [gave evidence](#) during the committee's scrutiny of the bill, and the committee's report drew heavily on the NSS's evidence.

The bill will replace RE with religion, values and ethics (RVE), among other reforms, which include making comprehensive relationships and sexuality education (RSE) compulsory.

The committee did not recommend further religious exemptions or loopholes in the bill, despite calls from some faith groups including the Catholic Education Service (CES).

The CES has rigorously objected in particular to the fact the bill will require faith schools to offer a pluralistic RVE option that must be in accordance with the locally agreed syllabus.

NSS position on the bill

The NSS [largely supports the Welsh government's efforts to reform RE](#), although it has warned that ministers risk falling short of their own ambitions.

The society's concerns include the fact that the new syllabus will still allow faith schools to teach a denominational form of RVE, although they will be required to offer a more objective and pluralistic option where parents request it.

The NSS has also raised concerns that some pupils will miss out on comprehensive rights-based RSE where faith schools are permitted to teach it through an often discriminatory religious ethos.

The NSS has long argued that children should receive an objective and pluralistic education on religion and belief.

Committee's key recommendations

In a [report outlining its findings](#), published last Friday, the committee said the Welsh government should:

- Consider concerns around the purpose of local bodies which determine RE curricula, currently known as standing advisory councils on religious education (SACREs). It noted NSS criticisms of SACREs, which tend to be heavily influenced by religious interests.
- Launch a myth-busting campaign around relationships and sex education – a recommendation which the NSS helped to secure.

- Clarify why the bill did not provide for older children to choose the form of RVE they prefer when they are mature enough.
- Consider how it can ensure the place of human rights, including children's rights, is "secure in the long-term" in the curriculum.
- Prescribe more key material where there are concerns it could otherwise drop off the syllabus.

NSS extensively quoted in report

The report featured mentions of the NSS's concerns around:

- Faith schools' ongoing ability to teach a denominational syllabus.
- Plans to remove the parental right to withdraw children from RVE while the potential remained for the subject to be used as a vehicle for proselytisation.
- The fact that the bill does not contain plans to abolish the requirement on schools to hold acts of collective worship.

In response to the report's publication the NSS has now briefed members of the Senedd, who are due to debate the bill and the committee's report next week.

NSS comment

NSS head of education Alastair Lichten said: "The committee has rightly resisted religious pressure which would water down children's right to a pluralistic and critically-informed education on religion and belief.

"It's also made several helpful recommendations which should prompt ministers to take further steps to put children's interests before those of religious groups."

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