

U.K.: faith schools delay introduction of comprehensive sex and relationship education till at least 2020

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The introduction of compulsory relationships and sex education (RSE) in all English schools has been delayed from 2019 until 2020.

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 required the Government to bring forward statutory guidance to make relationships and sex education compulsory in English schools. Since then some religious groups have been lobbying the Government for greater opt-outs – particularly over addressing LGBT issues.

Under the 'reducing teachers' workload protocol', schools would have needed twelve months to prepare for the new curriculum requirements. That can't happen until the draft guidance (expected this week) is launched, consulted on and reviewed, before being voted on by Parliament. A response to the call for evidence which would have preceded the guidance (and which closed in February) has yet to be published, after receiving a reported 23,000 responses.

One example of a response to the consultation, circulated by an Islamic group, claimed children "from the age of four" would be "exposed to indecent resources". A guide by a Christian group warned of the "active promotion of an LGBT agenda" and the problems of treating "all lifestyles as equally valid", calling for Christian beliefs to be promoted through all aspects of RSE and PSHE. In January a delegation of Jewish Orthodox leaders told schools minister Lord Agnew they would make "no compromise when it came to the protected characteristics relating to alternative lifestyles and recently-legitimised forms of marriage which could not be accommodated within any orthodox educational framework". At this meeting the principal of Yesodey Hatorah Senior Girls' School (a state funded school with a history of censoring textbooks and exams over issues of gender, sex and sexuality) urged Lord Agnew to "appreciate Judaism's strict religious rules governing relationships issues, that certain very personal matters could not be taught or discussed in the classroom". In a recent meeting with Lord Agnew, The National Secular Society urged him ensure that all schools are required to teach impartial and LGBT inclusive SRE, informed by healthcare and educational professionals, rather than religious scripture.

In May 2018, research by the NSS (Unsafe Sex Education: The risk of letting religious schools teach within the tenets of their faith) found that 77% of secondary faith schools are teaching RSE subject in accordance with religious scripture. Many faith schools explicitly teach that same-sex relationships are wrong and criticise sex outside of marriage. Some condemn contraceptives and abortion and teach taboos around menstruation.

It is not clear to what extent lobbying from faith schools has delayed the publication of draft sex and relationships guidance.

NSS education and schools officer, Alastair Lichten, commented: "We're sympathetic to teachers' concerns about a lack of time to prepare, but the Government's delays have helped bring us to this point." "We want to see a sex education curriculum that is comprehensive, age appropriate, non-stigmatising and non-discriminatory. We look forward to the draft guidance being published soon

and will strongly advocate against any faith school opt outs which undermine this."

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