

BHA BRIEFING 2010: Children, Schools and Families Bill Clauses related to PSHE Education - Commons Committee Stage

Monday 25th January

Introduction

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity representing and supporting the non-religious. Humanist organisations have championed better sex education for decades, and working for more inclusive practices and rational approaches in education forms a key part of the BHA's mission.

The BHA is committed to encouraging informed and responsible choices and believes that all children are entitled to full and accurate Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE), including Sex and Relationships Education (SRE). As objective SRE is known to improve young people's health and wellbeing, we believe that the religious character of their school (which may not be shared by the school's pupils or their parents) should not be allowed to reduce their entitlement. We believe that PSHE should be treated like any other National Curriculum subject and that the right of parents to deny their children sex and relationships education lessons should cease. Given that the conflicting rights of parents to withdraw children from lessons and a child's right to receive SRE, the BHA believes that the law should firmly support the child and his or her present and future health.

Consequently, we broadly welcome the changes to PSHE that the Bill proposes in clauses 10 to 14, with some reservations. At the moment the education system fails many children by requiring only that they are taught about the basic biological aspects of sex, contraception and sexually transmitted infections. PSHE should be made compulsory throughout key stages one to four, and the Bill would raise standards in many schools up to a level that a large proportion of schools already provide.

We are very concerned by a number of the amendments that have been submitted to these clauses, which collectively would serve to dilute the provision of PSHE that pupils received, or take away their entitlement altogether. We have detail our concerns further below.

For more information, contact Paul Pettinger, Education Campaigns Officer, on paul@humanism.org.uk or 020 7462 4991.

Clause 10 – Areas of learning

The BHA broadly welcomes the introduction of a new primary curriculum with a broader emphasis on personal development contained in the 'understanding physical development, health and well-being' area of learning, which includes age appropriate PSHE and SRE.

We are naturally very concerned by all those amendments that would challenge young children's entitlement to this area of learning and urge you to oppose them.

Clauses 11 – PSHE in maintained schools and 12 – PSHE in Academies etc.

We very much welcome the fact that these clauses will make PSHE part of the National Curriculum at key stages three and four in maintained schools, Academies, City Technology Colleges (CTCs) and City

Colleges for the Technology of the Arts (CCTA), which will lead to a much improved quality of provision.

We therefore urge members to reject amendments that will threaten the place of PSHE in the National Curriculum and undermine the place of SRE as being a distinct part of PSHE. As with all other curriculum subjects, we also believe schools should be free to determine the proportion of time they allocate to PSHE.

Sections 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7 of the proposed new clause 85B of the Education Act 2002 are vital, as they stipulate the principles with which governing bodies and head teachers must comply in providing PSHE. We are still very concerned by the manner in which schools will be able to present information about crucial issues, such as contraception and different sexualities, and therefore urge you to reject any amendments that take away the protection that section 4.7 of the proposed new clause 85B would offer.

Clause 13 – Sex and relationships education: manner of provision

We welcome the changes proposed in clause 13 of the Bill, which are in keeping with the other changes to PSHE proposed by the Bill. The same requirements for compulsory PSHE in maintained schools should also be extended to Academies, CTCs and CCTAs.

Clauses 14 – Exemption from sex and relationship education

We are very disappointed by this section of the Bill. Good SRE is known to reduce unwanted pregnancies, reduce the spread of sexually transmitted infections, and equip young people with the language and tools to be clear about personal boundaries, understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, to be able to resist pressure assertively and to know who to talk to and how to ask for help if and when they need it. For older children it helps them resist pressure, make safe choices and be able to challenge and be critical of misleading and inappropriate messages about sex in the media. By allowing parents to deny their children SRE, parliament will undermine children's health and wellbeing, and children who are withdrawn from SRE will often be those who most need it.

At present the parental right of withdrawal is hardly ever used. Allowing the right of withdrawal to continue is also out of step with the views of the UK Youth Parliament, education professionals and with public opinion generally. A Mori poll in October 2009 of 1791 adults showed that 80% of people (81% of parents) agreed that every child should attend sex and relationship lessons as part of the National Curriculum¹.

Introducing a new cut-off point for right of withdrawal will only encourage some parents to withdraw their children from vital SRE lessons until they lose that right. We believe it is very harmful that the Government wishes to send out the signal that 15 is an appropriate age to first receive SRE. This is the worst kind of concession that they could give to a very minority religious lobby which will impact some of those vulnerable young people who most need comprehensive SRE from a young age.

Amendments which attempt to further strengthen the right of withdrawal should be opposed.

¹ <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=14448>