

NSS response:

Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Schools

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Submitted by email: committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk

Introduction

This response is made on behalf of the National Secular Society (NSS).

The NSS is a not-for-profit, non-governmental civil society organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. We advocate for separation of religion and state and promote secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. We seek a diverse society where all are free to practise their faith, change it, or to have no faith at all. We uphold the universality of individual human rights, which should never be overridden on the grounds of religion, tradition or culture.

We believe relationships and sex education (RSE) is essential for protecting children and young people's health and wellbeing – including safeguarding them from abuse and exploitation. When properly taught, RSE ensures students are equipped with the knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence to cope with the many pressures and challenges of adult life.

Inclusive, factual and age appropriate RSE should therefore be taught in all schools – regardless of what religious ethos they may have.

We responded to the Department of Education's RSE Consultation last year. We would like to submit some of the points we raised in our response to that consultation as part of the Committee for Education's inquiry.

RSE in Catholic and other religious schools

RSE in all schools should be factual, age appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate. This includes covering contraception, abortion and same sex relationships.

The current CCEA guidance says RSE must be taught 'in harmony with the ethos of the school and reflect the moral and religious principles held by parents and school management authorities'. This part of the guidance will essentially exempt Catholic schools and other faith schools from the requirement to teach scientifically accurate RSE without advocating and opposing a particular moral/ethical view. Catholic schools seek to inculcate Catholic doctrine, which says contraception, abortion, sex outside of marriage and same sex relationships are morally wrong. This will not only undermine efforts to educate about safe sex – it will stigmatise children and families who are gay and children with unmarried parents.

We therefore call for this part of the CCEA guidance to be dropped.

The Catholic Church is itself aware of this conflict. The Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS) has said in a statement that the new legislation will "impose on schools a particular ideological view of abortion and the prevention of early pregnancy", and that the expectation that schools should become engaged in the delivery of a

neutral curriculum which highlights access to abortion “shows no understanding of the foundational principles of Catholic education”¹.

We strongly believe that the solution to this conflict is to discontinue any requirements or allowances for schools to teach RSE according to religious principles.

Our concern echoes those of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), which last year reported² that many post-primary schools are failing to uphold children’s rights because they teach stigmatising ideas about contraception, abortion and homosexuality. The NIHRC found some schools present the Catholic teaching that “the use of any artificial means of preventing procreation is not acceptable”. The NIHRC said teaching young people that contraception is wrong “contradicts risk-reduction approaches to youth sexual activity”.

The research found most respondents do not mention “abortion” in their RSE policies. The majority of those that do reference “pro-life values” such as “right to life” and “precious life”. Twelve per cent of respondents teach abortion according to the “biblical principles of the sanctity of life” and “the Christian ethos”.

The NIHRC found while most schools condemn discrimination against LGBT people and claim to uphold inclusivity and diversity, schools “often contradicted these values in various ways”. A third of schools explicitly teach heterosexual relationships are the “main” or “ideal” context for sexual intimacy, including one school which says it is “the most desirable option for a person’s psychological development”.

Some schools say homosexuality is wrong, including one which states “the belief that homosexual acts are against the nature and purpose of human relationships will be presented to pupils”.

The report said most schools promoted abstinence, some specifically until marriage. Over 95% promoted the value of the “sanctity of marriage”.

Similar concerns have also been raised by the Children’s Law Centre. In its December 2022 stakeholder report, it said RSE provision is “inadequate”, and that “important RSE content may be excluded because it does not fit with the school’s ethos”. It particularly criticised the poor provision of RSE for LGBTI+ young people. It said LGBT students report homophobic bullying and feel “unsupported” by the response of staff³.

Parental right of withdrawal from RSE

The parental right of withdrawal is not balanced sufficiently in the direction of children’s rights. Allowing parents to withdraw children from RSE, which teaches essential information about how to keep themselves safe and protect themselves from abuse, conflicts with Articles 1-3 and 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children from conservative religious communities are those least likely to receive adequate sex education outside of schools. They are therefore the ones most in need of impartial, appropriate education in this area at school, but they are also the children most likely to be withdrawn due to parents’ religious attitudes towards sex and relationships. The right of withdrawal therefore results in the children most in need of sex education receiving the least. The Children’s Legal Centre has also raised concerns about abuse of the parental right of withdrawal⁴.

We therefore call for the parental right of withdrawal to be repealed.

¹https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/11/10/news/catholic_schools_body_says_new_legislation_on_sex_education_imposes_abortion_ideology_on_schools_-3763841/

²<http://www.nihrc.org/publication/detail/nihrc-report-relationships-and-sexuality-education-in-post-primary-schools-in-northern-ireland-a-compelling-case-for-reform>

³<https://childrenslawcentre.org.uk/uncrc-reports-2023/>

⁴<https://childrenslawcentre.org.uk/uncrc-reports-2023/>

Evangelism in schools

The legal requirement⁵ for all schools in NI to give ministers of religion access to pupils to deliver religious education (RE) has also contributed to the spread of distorted and stigmatising RSE.

In a report published in March⁶, Parents for Inclusive Education Northern Ireland (PfIE) called for "systemic reform" to education after it estimated representatives from churches and religious organisations are making over 11,500 visits to primary schools every year. PfIE's research found 77% of primary schools have no recorded process to determine which religious visitors are given access to pupils, and over half (53%) of schools only make parents aware of religious visitors if the parents request this information.

PfIE found that in addition to churches, several organisations "with an openly stated mission of evangelising or discipling children" are being allowed access to primary school children. The "most prolific" of these is Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF) which made over 700 school visits in a single year. CEF is a registered charity whose stated purpose is to "to reach, evangelise and teach unreached children, unchurched children"⁷. CEF's "manual on the evangelism of children" says children are "sinners by nature and practice" who "stand guilty and condemned before God". It says: "We need faithfully and tenderly to warn children of eternal separation and punishment."⁸

Other churches which make school visits include Free Presbyterian, Elim, Vineyard and Gospel Hall (Plymouth Brethren). PfIE said a number of these churches "have an explicitly stated belief in the literal truth of the Bible regarding all matters including sin, punishment, hell and the devil."

The report said some religious bodies take stances on sensitive issues which can "hurt, exclude and other, creating harmful social dynamics and significant mental health risks".

Evidence of these harms was given by Alliance member Eóin Tennyson during an Assembly debate on RSE in April⁹. He recalled an occasion at his school in which a "religious facilitator" was brought in to preach abstinence and to teach that "sex was for marriage and that that was our only choice".

Tennyson said: "As a young LGBT person at school who, at that stage, could not get married, I knew that that facilitator was not speaking to me, that I was invisible and that that lesson and that education were not for me. They did not deal with my kind there".

He said that on another occasion there was one "fleeting reference to same sex couples", which was "met with laughter from teachers and pupils in the school".

He said: "Can you imagine how it feels to be a young person struggling with internalised homophobia, scared to tell your parents, relatives and friends who you are, only to have your sexuality laughed at in a public forum?"

He added that his experience "was indoctrination. It was not education."

Tennyson went on to say this "continues today with RSE in schools being outsourced to religious organisations".

He asked: "If the science curriculum was outsourced and a religious organisation refused to teach the theory of evolution, we would not stand for it, so why do we accept an approach to RSE in some of our schools that is not evidence-based?"

⁵ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1986/594/part/III/crossheading/religious-education-in-schools/2006-08-01>

⁶ <https://parentsforinclusiveeducationni.org/on-a-mission>

⁷ <https://www.charitycommissionni.org.uk/charity-details/?regId=100984&subId=0>

⁸ <https://www.teachkids.eu/pdfs/evangelism.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2024-04-22.7.18>

PfIE said the need for change to RE is "widely recognised". It called on schools to be transparent about all aspects of religious practice, prioritise "objectivity and inclusivity", and consider "the ethics of hosting external visitors".

We therefore urge the Assembly to work to abolish the legal requirement for schools to give ministers of religion access to pupils to deliver RE. We also call for greater requirements for schools to properly screen external visitors to ensure they do not engage in proselytising or spread stigmatising ideas about relationships and sex. No aspect of RSE should be delivered by groups with an evangelical agenda.