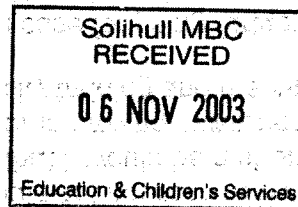


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5 November 2003

Dear Julie

Faith seminar on 22 October 2003.

As you are aware, the Secretary of State recently held a seminar to discuss faith issues in education with some key representatives of the main faiths in the country. All other faiths were represented by the Chair of the RE Council of England and Wales. I thought it would be helpful to give you an update of the events at the seminar.

The Secretary of State found the discussions helpful and stimulating. He was very heartened by the very positive attitude presented by all the delegates and their willingness to work together to take faith and belief issues forward in the educational system. We believe significant progress was made at the seminar and that there was a clear mandate from all involved to take faith issues forward.

There was wide agreement at the seminar that a national framework for RE would be a significant step forward. All present were clear that it would be possible for the different faith groups to come together and agree on such a framework. All felt strongly that it must be rooted in a clear understanding of the purpose of RE, and that it must place a strong emphasis on the shared aims and values common to all but must also support understanding and respect for difference.

It was clear that a framework alone would not address every issue facing religious education; but those present believed that it would be a strong foundation for addressing other issues, for example for improving awareness and understanding of the subject and in developing high-quality training and resources.

Some speakers at the seminar made a case for going further and producing a statutory national syllabus for RE. The Secretary of State believes that there are strong arguments for this approach, but acknowledges that it is contentious, particularly because of the value that is placed on local involvement in syllabus



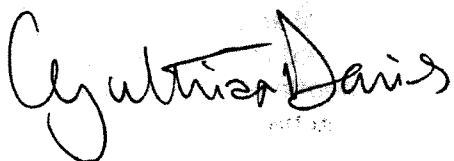
determination by SACREs. He is clear that SACREs would continue to play an important role in supporting religious education and in shaping it to meet local need even if there were a national syllabus; but believes that the most sensible way forward is to ask the QCA to begin work to develop a national framework, and to leave open the possibility that it might, at a later stage, become statutory, following further discussion and consultation.

The seminar also highlighted for the Secretary of State the importance of inviting contributions from a broad range of faith traditions, including those who speak for people without a faith. He has asked QCA to begin work on the development of a framework, and have asked in particular that they do so in the consultative and open spirit in which the seminar was held.

Mr Clarke was glad to have the opportunity to discuss collective worship at the seminar, and in particular that everyone was willing to see the discussion continue. Several delegates raised concerns about the current position on collective worship, but there was wide agreement that our first priority should be to work together on the framework for religious education. He agreed, though, to ask officials to prepare a paper looking at the areas where it would be possible to clarify the existing position, and in particular to point out the existing flexibilities around collective worship, without legislative change. This is now in hand and he hopes to have something to share with the RE community before Christmas.

The clear message on faith schools that Mr Clarke took away from the seminar is that there is a lot more that can be done to promote the positive contribution made by faith schools, and that delegates are very willing to get involved in this work. He believes that the focus of our activities on faith schools should be around supporting their positive contribution, through collaborative working between schools, and between schools and the local community. He has asked officials for advice on how we can take this forward, and he would like to involve the RE community in discussions once he has that advice.

The Secretary of State was very appreciative of the open and frank contributions to the debate. He was glad that delegates felt able to share their concerns on the future direction of faith issues in the educational system, and to offer possible suggestions for tackling the issues. He looks forward to the opportunity of working with the group again in the future.



Cynthia Davies
Primary Education, RE and Homework team.