

Department of Education of NI: Consultation about Relationships and Sexual Health

SECTION A: CONSULTATION ON DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S GUIDANCE ON THE CHANGE TO LEGISLATION –CURRICULAR CONTENT AT KEY STAGES 3 AND 4

1 The content of teaching and learning resources for Learning for Life and Work developed by CCEA should be factual and contain age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion and these resources should not advocate, or oppose, a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations of abortion or contraception.

Disagree

In our opinion, it is not possible to teach abortion in a morally neutral way. A 'scientifically accurate' education would recognise that human life begins with conception - the fertilisation of an egg to bring into existence a genetically unique human individual. Abortion ends the life of that human being. This is a moral issue. Similarly, some contraceptives may act by preventing the implantation of the early embryo in the womb, followed by the loss of that embryo.

To require that teaching about these issues is done in a morally neutral way will, in effect, 'normalise' abortion, which is a morally significant stance to adopt. CCEA's resources, we are told, will teach about contraception and abortion in the context of sexual and reproductive health and rights. This, too, is to take a moral and ethical position. It says to children that access to these services is your 'right.' Surely, a child will conclude, the government would not present as a human right something that is morally wrong.

We do not have sight of CCEA's resources, but no matter how neutral they may claim to be, the very decision to cover these subjects in the context of sexual health and reproductive rights is, in itself, to advocate abortion. We urge that CCEA resources should not present abortion (or access to potentially abortifacient contraception) as 'rights.' Rather, we suggest that CCEA recognise that these issues cannot be taught in a moral vacuum and instead provide resources that look at all sides of the moral debate, helping children to engage with the arguments in critical and age-appropriate ways. The 'scientifically accurate' education given should include an understanding of the stages of growth in the human embryo and fetus, and how contraception and abortion intersect with it.

SECTION B: CONSULTATION ON DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S GUIDANCE TO SUPPORT THE CHANGE TO LEGISLATION –PARENTAL OPT-OUT FROM LESSON(S) ON SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS COVERING PREVENTION OF EARLY PREGNANCY AND ACCESS TO ABORTION

2 Parents/carers should be informed about the specific nature and content of the age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.

Agree

We welcome this guidance but believe the language should be strengthened. We suggest it should be made a *requirement* that schools inform parents/carers, and that CCEA resources used in delivering this education be made available to parents for scrutiny well before the lessons take place.

Ideally, these resources should be available to see on the school's website. So, the first line of Statement 2 would be changed to 'Parents/carers must be informed by schools...' For the reasons stated in answer to Q1, we strongly request that education covering 'early pregnancy and access to abortion' not be presented as part of 'sexual and reproductive health and rights.'

The new Regulations state that 'The Department must make provision about the circumstances in which, at the request of a parent, a pupil may be excused from receiving the education required to be provided by virtue of Article 5(1A), or specified elements of that education.' This statement needs further clarification, in our opinion. It does not clearly state that a parent's request for their child to be excused from these lessons will always be honoured, as we believe it should. As it stands, it seems to suggest that there might be circumstances when a pupil would not be excused, despite the request of parents.

3 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child includes at Articles 1-3 and 12 the rights of the child to 'express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously' and at Article 5 'the rights and responsibilities of parents and carers to provide guidance and direction to their child as they grow up so that they fully enjoy their rights. This must be done in a way that recognises the child's increasing capacity to make their own choices.' The Department's guidance, when developed, should consider in such instances how schools balance the rights of both children and parents/carers in implementing the regulations.

Disagree

We are very concerned about the way in which this question is posed. It appears to pit the rights of the child against those of their parents/carers and gives schools the power to strike a balance between the two in implementing the regulations. Even if the school could be relied upon to act as a truly neutral 'umpire' (and CCEA resources have been shown to be far from neutral when it comes to education around, for example, gender identity) it unhelpfully presents the interests of parents and their children as in some kind of contest.

We believe that the education of children is primarily the responsibility of their parents. Education works best when schools (and Education Departments) recognise this and seek to work together with parents/carers in partnership. It is especially important in areas of contention that parents make clear the beliefs and values they are seeking to inculcate in their children and that schools accept and respect their wishes, even if they do not always agree with them. It is harmful to children if the two most influential sources of authority in their lives appear to be pulling in different directions.

In general, nobody knows a child better than their parents and nobody wants the best for a child more than their parents. A wise parent will adjust their parenting style to the age and maturity of their growing child, guiding gently but also giving room for that child's own personality, gifts and opinions to emerge and thrive. Of course, there will be occasional tensions as 'boundaries' are challenged and expectations adjusted, but it is not helpful to the flourishing of families to set the

rights of children as somehow against the rights of parents, as this question appears to do. Under no circumstances should the school usurp the rights of parents or undermine their values in the eyes of their children.

We are concerned that the guidance as presently worded, could be seen by schools as giving them the right to determine the views of children in these contentious areas. This, we believe, would be wrong in principle and particularly destructive where the school held a firmly pro-choice, pro-abortion view and parents a firmly pro-life view, whether for religious or other reasons.

We believe it should be for parents to assess the content and age-appropriateness of RSE education, wherever in the curriculum it is taught, and decide whether to withdraw their children from classes. To make a well-informed decision, parents must know what is going to be taught and have access, well in advance, to the resources that will be used. The only circumstance in which a school should go against the wishes of parents is when the school is acting in accordance with its safeguarding protocols.

4 Pupils and parents/carers should have access to an overview of their school's RSE policy and planned RSE programme.

Agree

We have hesitated to answer Q4 with 'agree.' We do, of course, agree with the statement as it stands, but would like to see much greater engagement with parents than the rather minimalist terms of Q4 suggest. For example, we request:

i) that the word 'should' be changed to 'must,' to emphasise that schools must take the initiative in consulting with parents/carers

ii) that parents and school governors be consulted before the RSE curriculum and resources are drawn up and before any significant review of that provision

iii) that the school take active steps to ensure that parents know about the consultation period and have repeated opportunities to both engage with the process and record their views

iv) that the school must be able to show that they have not only recorded the views of parents/carers but that those views have had a demonstrable impact on the design, content and delivery of RSE

v) that the final policy includes guidance to teachers on what is age-appropriate content across Key Stages 3 and 4, how to fulfil their duty to teach in an unbiased way, the importance of maintaining a culture of mutual respect in the classroom such that students with minority beliefs and values feel free to share their convictions without fear, and how to handle questions from students about contentious issues.