GUIDANCE ON MULTICULTURAL AND MULTIFAITH ISSUES IN CHURCH OF ENGLAND SCHOOLS IN THE DIOCESE OF LONDON

Forward from the Rt Revd & Rt Hon. Dr, Richard Chartres, The Bishop of London:

'I am happy to commend these guidelines for use in the Diocese of London's Church of England Schools. As part of our Christian commitment to the people of London we welcome children of many cultures and faiths. These guidelines have been written to provide practical assistance to the school, staff and governors in their work.'

Introduction

1. At the LDBS we celebrate the diversity of cultural and religious groups attending our schools. We are proud too about the work schools do in educating their pupils not only to grow in their own faith but to respect and value the beliefs and customs of others.

2. To support schools in the sometimes sensitive issues relating to cultural and religious diversity, the LDBS has written this brief practical guidance based on matters regularly raised by headteachers and governors in our schools.

3. It is hoped that by reflecting on their current practices and procedures relating to the religious and cultural needs of their pupils, schools will feel more confident in addressing situations should they arise, pupils will participate fully and confidently in all school activities and all parents will feel included in the school community.

4. The areas raised in this guidance are not exhaustive. In the event of specific issues arising, schools can, of course, contact their School Adviser at the LDBS.

Schools and parents

5. Many parents of other religions choose Church of England schools for their children because they wish their children to be educated in a religious environment which has common values with their own religion.

6. Most schools take into account the wishes of parents from different religions and cultures and make arrangements to accommodate these wishes as much as is possible. However, to ensure as full an understanding about the meaning of a Church of England school, governors and headteachers can take steps to provide clear explanations in school booklets and introductory meetings so that parents can make informed choices in their selection of school.

7. Where good co-operation and trust between home and school exists, it has been achieved through clear routes of communication and the acknowledged desire that home and school work together and learn from one another to create a learning culture which values diversity and the experiences of all.

8. There are aspects of school life that present daily opportunities to demonstrate to pupils and parents/carers a sensitive and positive approach to religious and cultural diversity.

9. Schools should be aware of different cultural, linguistic, religious needs when meeting with parents. For example, a Muslim father may not wish to shake hands with a female teacher or a Muslim mother with a male teacher. This can easily be interpreted by the school as rudeness on the part of the parent involved, which can in turn lead to reduced partnership. It is important to remember that some Muslims have no objection to doing so. It is important for schools therefore to establish with individuals their cultural and religious preferences rather than make general assumptions.

10. Parents/carers may also have expectations of schools based on experience of other educational systems. Issues such as the methods of punishment and teaching styles may lead to misunderstandings and undermine effective partnerships.

11. PTAs should also consider the more subtle areas where conflict or upset may be unintentionally caused. They should consider the appropriateness of certain social events, such as bingo nights, fashion shows, wine and cheese evenings. The presence of alcohol at functions may make attendance impossible for some parents/carers.

12. Some schools provide a wide range of PTA events to enable parents to attend those they feel most comfortable with. An acknowledgement on the part of the school that some parents may be more comfortable with some events than others would help to ensure greater harmony within the school and allow parents who sometimes may feel isolated to feel a valued part of the whole community.

Religious education

13. The 1988 Education Act states that RE should be taught to all registered pupils. The Act contains a conscience clause giving parents the right to withdraw their children from RE. However, it is not usual for parents attending church schools to do this, including those parents of other faiths who have chosen a church school. Governors and staff should refer to the published Diocesan guidance on RE.

Collective Worship

14. The 1996 Education Act requires schools to arrange a daily act of collective worship. As with RE, parents have the right to withdraw their children from collective worship in school. Where pupils *are* withdrawn it is important for schools to provide *appropriate alternative* provision for such pupils.

15. In some cases parents are happy for their children to attend acts of worship at school but not in church. Again schools should make appropriate provision for those pupils who have been withdrawn from attending church. In these cases some schools provide an act of collective worship in school mirroring that being done in church to ensure that pupils do not miss out on the content of the worship.

16. Collective worship should be explicitly and unashamedly Christian; that does not mean that common themes cannot be explored eg fasting, prayer, God as Creator, or, that stories drawn from other faiths and cultures should not be used. Governors and staff should refer to the published Diocesan guidance.

Sex Education

17. This is a sensitive subject and guidance can be found in the published Diocesan guidelines.

Religious festivals

18. The 1993 Education Act confers the legal right to allow parents to absent their children from school on the occasion of religious festivals. **Schools will therefore need to be aware of dates when arranging school events so as to ensure that all pupils will be in school to participate.** For example, Muslim parents may wish their children to celebrate the two major Muslim religious festivals; Eid ul Fitr and the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, and Eid ul Adha, some ten weeks later. They may wish to have a day-away from school for each festival. Jewish parents may wish their children to celebrate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and Hindu parents may wish their children to celebrate Divali.

19. **It is helpful if the school has a statement regarding holidays for religious observance in the school prospectus.** Again, schools are giving parents the opportunity to exercise their rights.

20. **It is good practice also to provide information to parents prior to main religious festivals stating the school's arrangements. Schools should consider translations of this information whenever possible.**

21. This communication will
    - acknowledge the importance of the religious festival
    - show concern for the welfare and education of the children
    - state clearly the policy on authorised absence and the number of days absence permissible.
    - ask for confirmation from parents about whether their child will be absent/fasting and if so on which days.
    - outline the school's provisions for pupils wishing to fast.

Staff

22. Requests from staff for absence from school during religious festivals should be treated sympathetically and granted in accordance with the school pay policy. Schools may wish to include a section in their pay policy on this area if they have not already done so. The Commission for Racial Equality recommends that two days absence with pay might be allowed to celebrate religious festivals. Local Authority practice may vary and allow for only one day for each festival. Schools that have concerns are recommended to contact LDBS for further advice.

School meals

23. It is important that schools are sensitive to the relationship between religious beliefs and diet and do not unintentionally discriminate against some pupils in their school meal arrangements. Governors and staff will understand that complex issues arise in this area of school life. Where halal meat is served, the LDBS believes it should not be the only meat option as some have ethical objections to halal and some faiths cannot eat it at all (for example, Sikhs). Where meat is served, a non-meat alternative should always be available. Governors should also be aware that many processed foods brought into school (e.g. sweets, jelly, biscuits) may not be recognised as halal or kosher and some children may not be permitted to eat them.

Fasting

24. Schools need to be sensitive to the wishes of parents and pupils during Ramadan. Older primary pupils may wish to fast for the whole of Ramadan or for several days.

25. Schools should consider:
    - Explaining to parents any special arrangements made for pupils who are fasting during Ramadan
    - Asking parents to inform the school as to whether or not their child will be fasting and if so, on which days.
    - Establishing a register of pupils fasting each day.
    - Explaining to pupils such as what to say when the dinner register is being called.
    - Explaining to teachers what to note in dinner registers.
    - Making provision for pupils at lunchtime such as a room or area away from the smell of food for those pupils fasting. Be aware also that an extra long lunch time outside running about is not helpful to pupils who will be feeling weak and thirsty. This provision of a quiet area away from the summer sun will also help stop pupils from feeling too tired or weak.
    - Adaptation of some curriculum areas, such as PE lessons. Less strenuous activities may be more appropriate for pupils who are fasting.
    - Using Ramadan as a starting point for curricular areas.
    - Being attentive to the subject matter of acts of worship at this time to ensure that they are not insensitive towards pupils who may be feeling weak or hungry.
    - For older pupils, the provision of a supervised place to pray with washing facilities and a vessel for washing.
    - Permitting older pupils to bring in their prayer mats and, if they wish, slippers to wear after ablution.

26. Governors should ensure that school staff, particularly those new to the school, appreciate that pupils will be rising early in order to eat before dawn and will stay up later at night, particularly if Ramadan is in the summer, in order to eat at dusk. Pupils who are fasting will be tired and may well be irritable in school through lack of food. Younger pupils not fasting may also be excitable. This may well impact on school life.

School uniform

27. Some groups have religious and cultural requirements relating to dress. With this in mind, schools will need to consider these requirements and include them in uniform lists stating the permissible colours and styles for example headscarves, trousers for girls, top knots for Sikh boys.

Items of religious significance and jewellery

28. Some religions require the wearing of religious artefacts.
    - Where possible all items should be removed or taped down to avoid injury to the wearer and other children.
    - Some Muslim children wear Quranic verses around the neck, upper arm or pinned inside clothes.
    - Chinese pupils may wear protective charms such as a piece of jade and, whilst not religious artefacts, these should not be treated as jewellery.
    - Early years children will have almost constant access to play equipment. For safety, it is suggested that they wear the *taweez* on long elastic for easy removal or a shorter cotton one that can be broken easily in case of accident. Another alternative is to pin the *taweez* into the inside of their clothing on an area which will not rub.
    - Sikh children wearing a gold bangle will need to cover them with a sweatband.
    - Nose studs, chains and earrings can be particularly hazardous in PE and requests to remove them should be handled sensitively. If stated in the school uniform and jewellery policy and also in the school booklet parents will see that these areas have been considered, acknowledged and, where possible, permitted. The link to children's safety and the need to remove items should be clear.

Some curricular considerations

PE:

29. Clothing should be appropriate for the activity and allow the wearer to take part in the activity safely. Tracksuits should be included in the PE uniform list.

Swimming:

30. Where possible swimwear should allow for modesty, in particular for girls reaching puberty. Girls may prefer a full body swimsuit or tight fitting leotard and footless tights. Boys may prefer to wear shorts to the knee but these must not be too baggy for safety reasons. Again by recognising this, and by stipulating colours and styles, schools are openly acknowledging that all pupils' needs have been considered. In some cases it has been appropriate to move swimming lessons into lower age classes so that all children get the opportunity to learn before puberty.

Changing

31. It is recognised that schools may be unable to provide individual changing rooms, but some adaptations can be made to ease the situation, if it arises, particularly at the top end of Key Stage 2. For example:

    - Boys and girls change in shifts.
    - Boys and girls change in different rooms.
    - Use of screens to divide the room.
    - Pupils change under large towelling robes or "tents".
    - Support from parents to supervise girls/boys in other room, toilets.

Expressive and performing arts

32. Muslim parents may not give permission for their daughters to appear on stage in public. Schools are recommended therefore to respect those wishes. Within Islam, for example, the study of art involving human images and iconography is specifically prohibited. Some Muslim parents may not wish their children to draw the human figure and schools should be sensitive to their wishes.

Extra-curricular activities

33. Some parents may also be reluctant to allow their children from attending. Reassurance on the part of the school and invitations by the school to the parents, to observe the classes, can alleviate any concerns. Some popular after-school clubs may clash with community classes and unwittingly prevent some groups of pupils from attending. Careful thought to timetabling and close liaison with local cultural groups will help to ensure that access is as full as possible for all pupils in the school.

Conclusion

34. This guidance should be seen as an instrument which guides our provision and response to the needs of other religious minorities, since the principles which guide this document – those of tolerance, respect and recognition of other cultural and religious groups are universally applicable.

35. Schools need to be clear in their understanding of religious and cultural differences, and clear in their communication of this understanding to parents and pupils. If communication is clear there is far more likelihood of there being a good working partnership rather than a situation developing where difficulties and possible conflict may arise.

36. Sensitive school policy signals respect for different customs and beliefs. In order to achieve this clarity of communication schools should review current policy and procedures, and importantly the school prospectus, to ensure that specific information is detailed and that procedures are clear to all staff and governors. Arrangements should also be made to ensure new staff receive the necessary information to understand the reasoning behind the policies and procedures relating to cultural and religious differences.

37. There are as many different opinions and ways of life amongst those of the same religion as there are among Christians or non-religious groups. Similarly there are as many differences between people with the same ethnic origin as there are between English or Scottish origin. It is fundamentally important that schools do not stereotype people belonging to various groups and that staff learn about the choices being made by individual pupils, their parents and their communities.

Recommended reading:

Understanding the Educational Needs of Muslim Pupils – Guidance for Schools, Teachers & Local Education Authorities is a valuable source of practical information.

Available from the Muslim Welfare House Trust, 233 Seven Sisters Road, London N4 2DA
Telephone: 020 7263 3071 www.mwht.org.uk

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Peterborough LEA – Multicultural Education department – contact Paul Butcher

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