

9th October, 2020

The Rt. Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP,
Secretary of State
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(sent via e-mail: sec-of-state-diary.ps@education.gov.uk)

I congratulate you once more on the immense hard work that your Ministers and your officials have been putting in non-stop to ensure that all of our schools and universities are functioning despite the pandemic.

I wrote to you earlier this summer on the question of RSE teaching and resources. I know how delighted those of our colleagues and myself were with the new DfE guidance which clarified so many of the difficulties schools are facing with the RSE materials offered by Government funded bodies. Inevitably, the in-appropriateness of these earlier materials, supported as they were by different Government departments, has left a number of questions that the new guidance has not yet addressed.

For example, there are a number of resources already widely used in schools, some of which still seem to be recommended by your department, which directly contravene the new guidance. I can provide examples if this would be helpful. While the responsibility for teaching materials that falls within the new guidelines rests with school governors and head teachers, might it be possible for your Department to set up an internal, Monitoring body with the specific task of ensuring that all materials taught on the nine protected characteristics are factually accurate, fall within current guidelines and offer a balance between the time and resources spent on each one?

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This balance between the nine Protected Characteristics is apparently lacking now. For example, some materials, apparently supported by the Government, have swapped Gender for Sex on Protected Characteristics, a clear breach of the 2010 Equalities Act. This is the kind of item that one would expect the Department itself to pick up and rule out. Nor are other crucially important Protected Characteristics given anything close to the same investment in teaching time and materials as HSE issues; neither disability, nor age or any of the other Protected Characteristics seem to be given the same importance. Might we expect schools, now required to spend a month celebrating Gay Pride, to adopt a month each for religion, age and for disability?

The second point is the Department's continued use of Stonewall to provide official advice. In the Department's excellent new guidance on training guidance the teaching of partisan views and equality issues are seen to be forbidden. Stonewall is widely known for its view of "Acceptance without Exception" a policy which is obviously partisan. Is it right that the organisation, sponsored as it is by your Department, should be the sole "expert" opinion cited? This would appear to be a major conflict of interest, which seems irreconcilable with the Department's fine aims of unbiased inclusive RSE education for children from all family backgrounds, faiths and cultures which make up our wonderfully successful society of today.

Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne