

**Citizenship, RE and PSHE need to be promoted to build respectful schools and societies
in post-Brexit Britain**

An open letter to the Secretary of State for Education

[anyone unable to edit to add own signature, please email lundied@hope.ac.uk]

Dear Ms Greening,

Following an urgent discussion of the implications that the referendum and subsequent xenophobic attacks have for moral and values education[1], we the undersigned call on the government to renew its commitment to community cohesion as an essential part of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of all young people. Firstly, we note that schools have not contributed to the rise in racism, xenophobia and division in the UK, and we would point the Secretary of State to the many examples of good practice such as the ‘*REsilience*’ programme[2], which supported teachers in dealing with contentious issues in the classroom. We are aware that the ever-changing world throws up challenges and opportunities for young people, for which they need to learn how to manage risk, make informed choices, and know how to access help and participate in democracy at all levels.

Nonetheless, we acknowledge that the referendum has raised deep questions about identity and belonging for many young people, for which an increasingly narrow academic curriculum has left them ill-equipped. In addition to acquiring knowledge, young people need to successfully develop conflict resolution, decision making skills, self-regulation, self-respect, negotiation and respect for those with different beliefs and values. We join with the many voices from faith and political leaders in condemning the rise of xenophobic and racist attacks. Schools provide an important space for dialogue, where opinions can be expressed, respected and evaluated. While we are aware of the many pressing matters for your attention, we ask you to make time to listen to existing good practice in spiritual, moral, social and cultural education from the Religious Education, Citizenship and Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education professional communities. We call on government to enable teachers to continue the good work of asking challenging questions, acknowledging the discomforting nature of some of the answers, and promoting a vision of our young people as global and European citizens.

Now is the time to commit to a renewed conversation about our shared national values, ensuring that young people’s voices are heard. In particular, we are aware of the dangers of some schools misinterpreting the need to promote fundamental British values in ways which close down, rather than open up, meaningful discussions. Religious Education and Assemblies are often the areas of school life where local and community concerns can most effectively be addressed, but we also recognise the fragility of these areas of the curriculum, which are increasingly being squeezed out by time pressures for ‘core’ academic subjects. This space for learning and for dialogue needs to permeate the whole curriculum and culture of schools, and not be seen as the preserve of any one curriculum subject. We also stress the need for democratic, moral and citizenship education to be experiential, something in which

students participate, and not something which is done ‘to’ them. We encourage school leaders to include both local and global perspectives across the curriculum and to draw hope from the continuing good practice of teachers in this area.

The area of values education has been the beneficiary of a number of positive European collaborations, shaped by consensus among teachers, academics and communities. These initiatives have helped practitioners in the UK evolve a sense of shared European identity, and go beyond access to funding sources. For example, the Council of Europe has developed policies and strategies for teaching about religious diversity, intercultural, citizenship and human rights education[3]. Only this month the Foundation for Peace launched a European Commission supported education tool ‘*Extreme Dialogue*’ to help schools to challenge extremism[4]. The OECD PISA assessment emphasises attitudes and values in addressing how we live together in its framework for Global Competence. We will always continue to seek out and develop these collaborations, and ask the government to seek assurances to enable continuing movement of young people and ideas.

We encourage the Department for Education to seek an inclusive conversation with young people, experts, practitioners and communities about the nature of British values and identity in the 21st century, seeking to include the devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We note that reports from Westminster Faith Debates, the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life and the Faiths and Civil Society Unit have called for review, including a wider study of values, recommending that the boundaries between RE, Citizenship and SMSC should be explored, and ask you to support the work of the RE Council Commission[5] as they explore these timely questions. We also note the All Party Parliamentary Group on RE’s recommendation that the impact of the EBacc on GCSE RS be reconsidered. We also note that four Parliamentary select committees, the Children’s Commissioner, the Chief Medical Officer, the Association for Directors of Public Health, the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, the Association of Independent Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards Chairs as well as the vast majority of children, teachers and parents support compulsory PSHE education and urge you to act on this advice as a means of ensuring that this is an entitlement for all children and young people.

We congratulate you on your appointment, and hope that this time of opportunity will provide much needed reflection on our shared human, global, British and local identities for your department, for schools and for all young people in the United Kingdom.

With our very best wishes,

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[1] A colloquium on Citizenship, Religion, Philosophy and Values in Education in Post-Brexit Britain was held at Liverpool Hope University on Monday 11th July. The event brought together teachers, NGOs, local authority representatives and academics from the fields of RE, Citizenship, PSHE and philosophy for schools.

[2] <http://www.re-silience.org.uk/>

[3]

<http://www.theewc.org/Content/Library/COE-Steering-documents/Recommendations/Signposts-Policy-and-practice-for-teaching-about-religions-and-non-religious-world-views-in-intercultural-education>

[4] <http://www.extremedialogue.org/>

[5] <http://religionseducationcouncil.org.uk/commission-on-re>