

Engaging with schools

How parents can make a difference

ENGLAND AND WALES EDITION

Our school system was founded by Christians and has been a great blessing. But today, alongside the good, there are trends in our schools that cause parents concern over what their children will be exposed to.

But parents are not powerless.

Every year, we help hundreds of them to engage constructively with their child's school. This can make a significant difference. The more parents speak up, the more impact they will have.

Inside you'll find simple, practical steps to help you be a Christian influence for the good of your own child and others, fulfilling your parental responsibility and your Christian duty to be 'salt and light' (Matthew 5:13-16).



Schools' duties and parents' rights

The duty to educate children rests with parents (Education Act 1996, s.7). Most choose to delegate this, at least in part, to a school which provides education on the parents' behalf. State-funded schools consequently have a duty to:

“ have regard to the general principle that pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents, so far as that is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure ”

EDUCATION ACT 1996,
SECTION 9

That is particularly true in relation to parents' religious beliefs:

“ In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions. ”

HUMAN RIGHTS ACT 1998,
SCHEDULE 1, PART II,
ARTICLE 2

These laws do not mean schools have to do everything that every parent wants; that would be unworkable. But they must treat parental concerns seriously and consider whether their wishes can be accommodated.

At an appropriate age, schools can expose children to views with which their parents disagree, but only as part of a fair and balanced consideration of different views. Schools should not set out to undermine parents' beliefs.¹ All schools in England, and state schools in Wales, are forbidden by law from one-sided promotion of political views. That isn't restricted to party politics. It includes the nature of marriage and transgender ideology – in fact anything that is related to public policy.²

In England, the law requires schools to consult parents *whenever* they review their policy on relationships and sex education.³ In Wales, guidance tells schools to “ensure their approach to curriculum design... includes two-way engagement with parents, carers and the wider school community”.⁴ This applies to the whole of the curriculum.

As a backstop, schools must allow parents to withdraw their children from collective worship (assemblies),⁵ and, in England, from religious education⁶ and sex education,⁷ but not relationships or health education.



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Get involved

Before resorting to quoting the law, it is helpful for parents to build a positive relationship with the school where possible. This may be by expressing thanks to teachers, volunteering where there are opportunities or getting involved in a Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Also, becoming a parent-governor will give you a say in school policies. This can be effective in guiding teachers away from harmful teaching.

But whether you take on such a role or not, schools should always welcome parental engagement with their children's education.

Ask questions

Try approaching the school with questions rather than waiting for something to go wrong and going to them with a complaint. You could have a word with the teacher at home time, or drop an email to the school. Here are some of the questions we have found to be most useful to parents:

- ▶ We are concerned about *X*. How will the school teach this in an age-appropriate way?
- ▶ How will RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) teaching be developmentally/age-appropriate to my child?
- ▶ We hold to mainstream Christian beliefs about sexual ethics. How will our views be treated in RSE teaching and how will discussions be managed so they are inclusive of the views of pupils from faith backgrounds?

- How will you ensure mainstream Christian views are presented fairly in discussions on contentious issues such as sexual ethics?
- How will you ensure my child does not feel excluded or marginalised because of his/her beliefs?
- People disagree sincerely about *X*. How will you ensure that a range of views on *X* is discussed in class?
- Is the school using external resources or agencies for RSE? If so, what checks have been done to ensure these are developmentally appropriate and reputable? How are these resources suitable for the variety of pupils' needs, including pupils who have religious beliefs?
- How will the school be teaching about pornography, and at what age? What will the key messages be?

If all else fails, all schools are required to have a formal complaints procedure and must respond to the specific concerns parents raise. In England, if parents remain unsatisfied, they have the additional right to escalate their concerns to the Department for Education.

More help

Equipped for Equality: a guide to what schools can and cannot do in the name of equality and human rights.



For Christian parents in England, we also have a detailed guide to RSE.



These publications are available on our website, or you can request free printed copies by emailing info@christian.org.uk or calling **0191 281 5664**.

The Christian Institute runs an education advice service, which you can access using the same contact details.



1. *Lautsi v Italy* (2012) 54 EHRR 3 at para. 62
2. *Dimmock v Secretary of State for Education & Skills* (2007) EWHC 2288, para. 11; *Political impartiality in schools*, Department for Education, 17 February 2022; *Teaching Citizenship and Politics Education*, Welsh

- Government, May 2021, page 14
3. Education Act 2002, Section 80B(3), Independent School Standards Regulations, Schedule, paragraph 2A(1)(f)
4. *Curriculum for Wales: continuing the journey*, Welsh Government, 31 January 2024 (emphasis added)

5. School Standards and Framework Act 1998, Section 71(1A)
6. School Standards and Framework Act 1998, Section 71(1)
7. Education Act 1996, Section 405, Independent School Standards Regulations, Schedule, Paragraph 2A(2)

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