What are the new standards?

In September 2014 the Department for Education introduced new standards, which require schools in England to ‘actively promote’ British values.

The Department for Education is muddling respect for people (which is always right) with blanket respect for beliefs and lifestyles (which is not always right). Concerns have centred on the new requirements that say schools must actively promote “the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs” [emphasis added]. It is also demanded that independent schools actively promote principles which “encourage respect for other people, paying particular regard to the protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010”.

Do all schools have to comply with the new rules?

Yes, all schools in England must adhere to the standards. For academies, free schools and private schools the changes are set out in the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014. The changes are being implemented for other schools by revised Ofsted inspection criteria.

Why do the new school standards cause concern for Christians?

It seems ‘British values’ are being interpreted to mean secular values. The new rules are already being used by some inspectors to push political correctness onto schools, which obviously conflicts with the ethos of religious schools and affects schools and teachers throughout the education system.

At the heart of the problem is vague wording combined with confusing signals from Ministers about how the new rules should be interpreted. Christians fully support respecting everyone as people made in the image of God and our democracy gives freedom to people whatever their religion. But in practice those implementing the new rules often seem to think ‘actively promoting respect’ means endorsing beliefs or lifestyles which the Bible teaches are wrong.

A strict reading of the standards would say they require respect for people: “those with different faiths and beliefs”. Government officials are mixing this up with demanding respect for the beliefs. But how can Christians possibly be asked to respect the beliefs of Scientology or Satanism?

I am involved in a school with a religious ethos – what do I need to know?

The Government’s ‘British values’ approach clashes with good laws laid down over many years which protect schools with a religious ethos, e.g. church schools. For example, such schools are legally permitted to discriminate on grounds of religion or belief in order to maintain their ethos (Schedule 11(5) of the Equality Act 2010). Schools with a religious ethos are expected by law to advance education in accordance with their trust deed or founding document.

I am involved in a normal state school – what do I need to know?

Schools should respect the Christian beliefs of teachers, parents and pupils, upholding their freedom of speech. The law still requires state schools in general to have daily acts of collective worship which are “wholly or mainly” Christian, and the main content of RE must be devoted to the study of the Christian faith,1 so Parliament clearly expects Christianity to be an everyday part of school life.

Teachers regularly have to respectfully explain beliefs or views which they do not themselves hold, but those implementing the new rules must not seek to compel teachers to personally endorse beliefs which go against their conscience.

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1 Section 70 School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and Section 375 of the Education Act 1996
What about the issue of same-sex marriage?

One flashpoint may be the issue of same-sex marriage. As recently as May 2014, the Department for Education said in its guidance document *The Equality Act 2010 and schools*: “No school, or individual teacher, is under a duty to support, promote or endorse marriage of same sex couples. Teaching should be based on facts and should enable pupils to develop an understanding of how the law applies to different relationships.” (paragraph 3.27)

The Equality and Human Rights Commission provided similar guidance on the same-sex marriage Act in March 2014, which says: “Teachers, other school staff, governors, parents and pupils are all free to hold whatever personal views they choose on marriage of same sex couples, including a view that marriage should only be between a man and a woman. The Government recognises that the belief that marriage can only be between a man and a woman is a belief worthy of respect in a democratic society.” (page 6)

How do the new rules affect the school curriculum?

The Equality Act 2010 stops schools from discriminating against pupils in the provision of education, but until now governments have carefully excluded the content of the school curriculum using Section 89 of the Equality Act. The regulations break the seal around the curriculum for the first time. It is hard to see how ‘actively promoting British values’ in schools can leave the curriculum unaffected.

What about the threat of ‘extremists’?

The Government justifies the revised standards by pointing to widespread concern about Islamic extremism and how this may have impacted certain schools in London and Birmingham. The evidence relating to specific schools is disputed, but it is surely possible for the Government to address any problems without suffocating the historic freedom of Christians in education. Christians will vigorously contest the notion that imposing secular values on schools is any solution at all.

It seems that those implementing “mutual respect and tolerance” often seem to think this means imposing a multi-faith mishmash on every school. The irony is that the new rules could actually end up requiring schools to promote Islam, along with other faiths.

It is surely the role of Britain’s security services, not Ofsted, to be addressing threats of terrorism – there has as yet been no evidence of actual terrorist activity in schools.

Is there any evidence of problems happening on the ground?

Trinity Christian School, a small independent school in Reading, was told it faces closure for not promoting other faiths and that non-Christian religious leaders (for example Imams) must be asked to lead assemblies. Girls at Orthodox Jewish schools have been “traumatised” by invasive Ofsted inspectors questioning them over issues such as same-sex marriage. In the name of ‘British values’ a school in rural Lincolnshire has even been downgraded for not being sufficiently diverse – effectively for being ‘too English’.

I am involved in a school which has been criticised by Ofsted using the ‘British values’ rules – what should I do?

Please contact The Christian Institute as soon as possible on 0191 281 5664. We may be able to help you.