

Family Education Trust

(Family and Youth Concern)

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Government-appointed review group marginalises parents over sex education

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Data obtained by Family Education Trust under the Freedom of Information Act reveals that the government-appointed review group on sex and relationship education (SRE) made no attempt to consult parents about what children should learn and when. While the review group sought the views of young people and teachers first-hand, it failed to commission any survey of parental concerns.

Young people and teachers

The Sex Education Forum, in conjunction with the UK Youth Parliament, was commissioned to undertake an online survey to elicit views from young people on what should be covered in SRE at each key stage. This was followed by a two day in-depth consultation with 15 young people looking at how SRE can be improved and ‘why young people need SRE’.

Similarly, the review group commissioned the Sex Education Forum, in conjunction with the PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) Subject Association, to conduct an online survey to obtain the views of both primary and secondary school teachers on ‘what inhibits better delivery of SRE’.

...but not parents

However, no similar survey was undertaken to seek the views of parents. Instead, the review group invited two of its members to give a presentation based on previous research and personal experience. Professor Roger Ingham from the Centre for Sexual Health Research at the University of Southampton was asked to undertake a review of existing studies of parents’ attitudes to school

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SRE, and David Kesterton, the manager of the *fpa*'s 'Speakeasy' programme, was asked to report on the key issues parents found it difficult to talk to children about.

Professor Ingham's literature review of parental attitudes was limited to five studies, one of which was undertaken as far back as 1978. The most recent paper he considered was a study he undertook himself 10 years ago. Professor Ingham is well known for his opposition to any approach that encourages young people to save sex for marriage. He is fully supportive of initiatives that are 'non-judgmental and respectful of confidentiality', believing that young people should not be denied 'the opportunity to form relationships and express their feelings safely in ways they choose to'.¹

Likewise, it is difficult to have confidence that David Kesterton would be in a position to represent the concerns of thousands of ordinary parents, given the *fpa*'s view that it is 'paternalistic' to hold that parents are best placed to judge what is in the best interests of their children.

The data released under the Freedom of Information Act also revealed that the review group considered five 'options' papers covering the training of teachers, involving outside agencies, providing guidance and support materials, using wider government programmes to improve SRE, and ensuring the involvement of young people in the design of their school's SRE programme.

But apart from one brief reference in the paper on guidance and support materials, parents were again conspicuous by their absence.

Family Education Trust director, Norman Wells, commented:

'The government has gone back on its promise to undertake a full public consultation before making taking on board recommendations made by the sex and relationship education review group; it has refused to meet with organisations representing parental concerns; and now, it emerges that while the review group sought the views of young people and teachers, no effort was made to speak to parents.

'It all adds up to show that parents are being treated with utter contempt.

‘It is simply not good enough for the government now to say that there will be a full consultation at a later date on the content of sex education and whether or not parents will retain the right to withdraw their children from sex education classes. Parents should have been involved in the process right from the beginning, not brought in after the wheels have been in motion for over a year.’

Reference

1. *BMJ*, 2000 December 16; 321(7275): 1520–1522

Notes for editors

1. In February 2008, the Department for Children, Schools and Families launched a review of the delivery of sex and relationship education in schools. The 25-strong steering group established to oversee the review included the Schools Minister Jim Knight, together with representatives from the UK Youth Parliament, the Sex Education Forum, Brook, the Terrence Higgins Trust, and the *fpa*, and the chair of the Teenage Pregnancy Independent Advisory Group, Gill Frances. Professor Roger Ingham and David Kesterton were also members of the group.
2. During July 2008, Lord Adonis, then Schools Minister in the House of Lords, announced that no decisions would be made about the future status of PSHE, including sex and relationship education, until account had been taken of the findings of the Primary Curriculum Review, which are due to be published in Spring 2009. At the same time, in declining a meeting with representatives of Family Education Trust and other pro-family groups, Jim Knight gave assurances that no decisions would be made about substantial recommendations made by the review group until there had been a full public consultation.
3. In October, the steering group’s report and the government’s response were published on the same day. Without awaiting the findings of the Primary Curriculum Review and without any public consultation, the government announced that it would make PSHE a statutory part of the curriculum at all key stages.
4. During the Autumn, Ministers set up an independent review of PSHE chaired by London headmaster, Sir Alasdair Macdonald, to consider ‘the most effective ways of making PSHE statutory’ and ‘the best ways to provide a statutory entitlement to PSHE education for all pupils’.

5. Following publication of Sir Alasdair Macdonald's report in April 2009, the government is proposing to hold two public consultations during the summer. One consultation will relate directly to Sir Alasdair's recommendations, while the other will be concerned with the legislation that would be needed to make PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) statutory. This will provide the first opportunity in the entire process for parents to express their concerns.

For further information:

Family Education Trust is an independent educational charity, without any religious or political affiliations, committed to promoting stable family life and the welfare of children and young people.