

**Comments on the Government Education White Paper**

***Schools: Achieving Success***

**THE MUSLIM EDUCATIONAL TRUST**



## *In the Name of Allāh, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind*

The Muslim Educational Trust welcomes efforts to improve education for children, regardless of race, religion, sex, ability or circumstances.

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills declared the government's aim "to ensure that all young people meet their potential regardless of their background or circumstances."<sup>1</sup> This has always our driving philosophy, and our especial concern has been helping Muslim children to fulfil their potential and achieve success whilst taking into account and respecting their religious background.

Schools should be able to meet the needs of their Muslim pupils and staff. Current curriculum constraints should be varied to prevent this. And schools should be given clear guidance by the DfES about meeting the needs of Muslims.

The role of religion and its relationship with education should be recognised and supported. The teaching of multi-faith Religious Education (RE) has recently taken even greater significance, and its value in helping young people to understand and appreciate religious diversity in society means it deserves to be supported through adequate resourcing and the training and recruitment of qualified RE teachers.

Faith schools have always played an important role in the British education system. Muslim schools have now joined the maintained sector. We would welcome efforts to expand the number of maintained Muslim schools as part of a drive to raise standards and increase diversity.

In the following pages, we consider four areas related to issues raised in the White Paper: underachievement, respecting religious identity, teaching, and faith schools. Responses to previous consultations from the Muslim community appear to have been neglected. We hope this Government will prove sincere in its determination to seek the views of all sections of society on ways to help schools achieve success, and that the views of Muslims in particular will not continue to be marginalized.

**The Muslim Educational Trust (estd. 1966) is Britain's oldest Muslim educational organisation. Its activities include: sending Islāmic Studies teachers to state schools; guiding the Muslim community on its education rights and needs; advising the DfES, LEAs, schools and others involved in education on matters concerning Muslims; the preparation and publication of Islāmic books and teaching aids in English; and the promotion of a better understanding of Islām in British society.**

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Education Organisations, 5 September 2001

## **Underachievement**

We continue to be deeply concerned by evidence of the underachievement of Muslim pupils. This issue was raised at a meeting between the (then) Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Shephard, and various Muslim organisations including the Muslim Educational Trust, in May 1995. Following this, the Secretary of State arranged a further meeting with representatives from the (then) DFE and other departments. A key problem was the lack of data about pupils' religious background, as oppose to ethnic background.

At that time, the DFE conducted a national consultation on the ethnic monitoring of school pupils. In response, we highlighted the need for information about the religious affiliation of pupils in addition to ethnic origin, and urged the DFE to address the issue. But nothing was done.

The Runnymede Trust's study of Islamophobia noted: "The relatively poor attainments of Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils at 16+, particularly when compared with national norms as distinct from the norms of their school or local authority, mean that they enter the labour market, or competition for places in higher or further education, at a considerable disadvantage. There is absolutely no room for complacency."<sup>2</sup> Children from this background are overwhelmingly Muslim.

It is not surprising they came to the same conclusion that the MET reached years before: **"The DfEE should collect, collate and publish data on the religious affiliations of pupils in all schools, including independent and grant-maintained schools as well as locally maintained schools."**<sup>3</sup> Again, nothing was done.

The White Paper acknowledges there is still a problem: "While there has been some evidence of narrowing achievement gaps, there are still substantial variations in standards between different parts of the country, between boys and girls, and between different social and ethnic groups."<sup>4</sup> The lowest levels of achievement are found to be amongst Bangladeshis and Pakistanis. The reasons for this underachievement are likely to be complex (e.g. poor housing and urban deprivation, high unemployment, etc.); but it would be folly to dismiss lack of consideration for their religious background as a possible factor.

It is quite natural for children to feel more positive about learning if their schools not only show respect for their religious background, but also ensure that their religious needs are accommodated. Conversely, if schools appear unsympathetic to religious needs or are unwilling to accommodate religious requirements, this might have a detrimental effect on children's self-esteem and consequently their learning.

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<sup>2</sup>The Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia – A challenge for us all*, 1997, p. 44

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 45

<sup>4</sup>*Schools: Achieving Success*, 2001, para. 2.13; see also para. 2.26 and figure 2.3

## *Comments on the Government Education White Paper 'Schools: Achieving Success'*

Urgent action is required to address variation in achievement. Clearly, one of the areas the government should explore is the relationship between religious identity and educational achievement. Last year the (then) DfEE initiated a consultation on ethnic monitoring.<sup>5</sup> In our response we again called for information about religious identity to be collected:

We would like to see the Annual Schools' Census collect information about the religious identity of pupils, alongside information about pupils' ethnic group.

There is already some degree of overlap, in that Jews and Sikhs are considered to be both religious and ethnic groups.

Moreover, the 2001 national population Census, on which the new classification of ethnic groups is based, will for the first time ask about religious identity. It makes sense to reflect this extension to the national population Census in the Annual Schools' Census.

The addition of such a question to the Annual Schools' Census would provide valuable information. It has not been possible in the past for the DfEE to answer concerns about underachievement of pupils from certain religious groups. It would also be helpful for local authorities in developing their local agreed syllabus for religious education, and in constituting their SACRES.<sup>6</sup>

## **Respecting religious identity**

We entirely agree, "... an excellent secondary education, built around the needs and aptitudes of the individual, should be the right and expectation of all children and their parents."<sup>7</sup> One of those needs must be the religious needs. The government's vision includes, "Diversity so that schools – individually and as a broader family locally and nationally – cater significantly better for the diverse requirements and aspirations of today's young people."<sup>8</sup> For many young people and their parents, religious requirements are no less important than any other aspect of their lives. An educational environment that takes into account the religious needs of children in a supportive and respectful manner will be more inclusive and will surely promote higher standards.

Indeed, the report on Islamophobia quotes research carried out by the Policy Studies Institute in the 1990s: "Seventy-four per cent of the Muslim respondents said that religions was 'very important'. This compared with around 45 per cent for Hindus and Sikhs, and only 11 per cent for white people who described themselves as belonging to the Church of England."<sup>9</sup> Given the importance attached by Muslims to their religious identity, it is perhaps not surprising that an educational system that does not accord those beliefs proper recognition results in the level of underachievement mentioned above

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<sup>5</sup> *Consultation on Guidance for schools on Ethnic Monitoring*, DfEE 0311/2000

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Paul Jackson, Ethnic Minority Pupils team, DfEE, 12 February 2001

<sup>7</sup> *Schools: Achieving Success*, 2001, para. 1.5

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 1.5

<sup>9</sup> The Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia – A challenge for us all*, 1997, p. 15

### *Comments on the Government Education White Paper 'Schools: Achieving Success'*

The Muslim Educational Trust was one of the many organisations to submit comments to the Runnymede Trust's Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia. In the chapter 'Making the nation' of their final report, about Islamophobia in education, they recognised the need for, "... coherent policies on topics such as the following: religious education, school dress code, school meals, collective acts of worship, fasting periods, religious holidays, Friday prayers, single-sex groupings and classes, contacts with parents, contacts with mosques and mosque schools, physical education dress, showering arrangements."<sup>10</sup> This reads like the table of contents in our publication *British Muslims and Schools*.<sup>11</sup>

For thirty-five years the Muslim Educational Trust has drawn attention to these issues. Whilst governments have always claimed their concern for all pupils regardless of background, very little progress has been made in addressing the needs of Muslim children. Although some Muslim schools now receive state funding, even the Runnymede Trust felt the need to say, "We point out that about 98 per cent of all Muslim children of school age are in mainstream schools and stress that it is essentially in mainstream schools that their needs must be met."<sup>12</sup>

In 1997 Andrew Smith, Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities, met representatives of the Muslim community, including the Muslim Educational Trust. Many issues were raised, not least of which was the need for guidance for schools about meeting the needs of their Muslim pupils. Whilst some schools show understanding and respect by making sure they accommodate the very simple and reasonable requirements of practising Muslims, many others do not. Sadly, nothing appears to have come of the meeting.

One of the recommendations of the Runnymede Trust was that local education authorities should work with schools to develop guidelines on the issues of concern to Muslims.<sup>13</sup>

However, we believe this does not go far enough. We are firmly of the opinion that there needs to be national guidance, prepared by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), that sets out clearly the special needs of Muslim pupils and the manner in which schools should meet these needs.

Guidance alone would not be enough to address all the concerns listed in the Runnymede Trust's report. Schools sometimes feel that the demands of the curriculum do not leave them room to take full account of religious needs. The White Paper concedes, "It is arguable that there is too little flexibility in the curriculum to meet and bring out individual aptitudes, abilities and preferences."<sup>14</sup>

One of the interesting proposals in the white paper is to allow some schools limited scope to vary the curriculum: "We will make sure that there is sufficient flexibility to allow students to

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<sup>10</sup> The Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia – A challenge for us all*, 1997, p. 46

<sup>11</sup> Ghulam Sarwar, *British Muslims and Schools*, 1994

<sup>12</sup> The Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia – A challenge for us all*, 1997, p. 3

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46

<sup>14</sup> *Schools: Achieving Success*, 2001, para. 2.25

### *Comments on the Government Education White Paper ‘Schools: Achieving Success’*

pursue their talents and aspirations while maintaining a strong focus on the basics. A core of subjects will remain compulsory, but there will be greater scope for variation in the rest of the curriculum.”<sup>15</sup> (4.15) We hope that this recognition of the usefulness of allowing schools more freedom with the National Curriculum will be extended across all key stages when examining difficulties posed by forcing pupils to engage in areas that conflict with their religious beliefs, notably in music and some aspects of PE.

The Government has said it will “Work with Ofsted, the Teacher Training Agency, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and other agencies to share good practice and make sure that the needs of ethnic minority pupils are addressed as part of all relevant policy developments.”<sup>16</sup> Whilst organisations such as the Muslim Educational Trust are generally invited to comment on general education developments, such as this White Paper, there has been little effort in recent years to engage the Muslim community through its educational organisations to explore ways of meeting the needs of Muslim pupils. We hope that any sincere effort to ensure success and high standards are genuinely sought for all will in future include seeking specific advice and support from Muslim educational organisations.

## **Teaching**

One of the ways of raising standards is by providing suitable role models. There are proportionately far too few Muslim teachers in schools. We welcome the Government’s intention to work “alongside community leaders, parents and representatives of faith communities.”<sup>17</sup> The White Paper proposes to “recruit more teachers from ethnic backgrounds.”<sup>18</sup> Potential Muslim recruits to the teaching profession may well be deterred by the absence of any rights to protect their religious requirements. It is left to the discretion of schools to determine whether Muslim teachers may dress according to religious requirements, or make the small amount of time necessary in the school day for daily prayers. Whilst more enlightened schools are very accommodating in this regard, it is still not universally the case. We believe that Muslim teachers should not need to be left to the whim of school governing bodies and head teachers when it comes to facilitating basic religious practices. Teachers should be accorded legally enforceable rights in respect of these practices. At the very least, guidance should be given to schools by the DfES so that the reasonable expectations of Muslim teachers are clear to their employers.

The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) has already established a training programme with the Association of Muslim Schools (AMS), which aims to bring more Muslims into the teaching profession. We hope that such initiatives will be maintained and expanded.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 4.15

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 3.30

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 3.29

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 3.30

### *Comments on the Government Education White Paper ‘Schools: Achieving Success’*

The White Paper notes that, “Schools already promote social and moral development, for example through the place of RE in the curriculum; ...”<sup>19</sup> Yet RE remains seriously under-resourced, with seemingly little effort placed on the recruitment and retention of RE teachers compared to other shortage subjects. The contribution of multi-faith RE to the school curriculum has never been more important than at these troubled times, and we would urge the Government to channel increased resources and support for a subject that retains a unique place in the school curriculum.

### **Faith schools**

We applaud the Government’s decision to encourage “all schools to build a distinct ethos and centre of excellence, whether as a specialist school or by some other means.”<sup>20</sup> At the heart of this should be a strong moral code that fosters mutual respect, diligence and social responsibility. Indeed, this has always been a feature of the very best schools.

We welcome the Government’s intention to expand the number of faith schools. We agree that there is strong evidence to show that “schools with a distinct identity perform best, with the ethos acting to motivate staff and pupils across a wide range of subjects and activities, improving teaching and learning.”<sup>21</sup>

There are dozens of independent Muslim schools in Britain. Whilst some of them wish to remain independent, others would prefer to be in the maintained sector. Though the last four years saw the first Muslim schools being accepted in the maintained sector, the route has been long and difficult. We believe the Government should back its commitment to the expansion of faith schools by helping existing and proposed Muslim schools not only with expert advice and support, but also with funding, especially of capital costs. Even now, some independent Muslim schools achieve promising results despite having only a fraction of the funding of maintained schools.

A further difficulty arises from some aspects of the National Curriculum. We are in no doubt the core curriculum should be maintained and strengthened, but we feel there is room, as indicated in the White Paper (chapter 4), to vary the requirements of the curriculum where they cause faith-specific difficulties.

We note that the White Paper uses the term ‘inclusive’ faith schools. We fully agree that admission to faith schools in the maintained sector should be open to all regardless of race or religion; but this should not be a barrier to the formation of single-sex schools, which already exist in the maintained sector, are extremely popular with parents, and better meet the needs of the Muslim community particularly at secondary level.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 3.44

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 1.6

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 5.3

### *Comments on the Government Education White Paper 'Schools: Achieving Success'*

We support the intention to “encourage schools to choose to establish new partnerships with other successful schools, the voluntary sector, faith groups or the private sector, where they believe this will contribute to raising standards.”<sup>22</sup> We believe the Muslim community will wish to offer whatever help possible to raise standards in schools, which may include helping to build a school’s ethos.

## **Conclusion**

British Muslims contribute to the overall development of British society and add to its richness. Muslim-owned businesses, Mosques and minarets are now an integral part of multicultural Britain, although Muslims still face much discrimination. The Head of State, HM The Queen, recognises the positive contribution of British Muslims to the richness of modern Britain: “A distinctive new identity, that of British Muslim, has emerged; I find that healthy and welcome.”<sup>23</sup>

The needs of British Muslim children are not many, nor are they unreasonable or difficult to accommodate. It is high time that these needs were taken seriously, and measures introduced to tackle them. It would be an understatement to say that past responses to these needs have been disappointing. We strongly believe that our education system should accommodate children’s religious beliefs and practices.

**We urge the Government to acknowledge the religious needs of British Muslim children, to take whatever action necessary to address those needs, and to ensure that all Muslim children in Britain are able to take their place in the British education system without compromising their religious beliefs.**

Education should aim to produce balanced growth of the total personality of a child. This should include development of intellect, imagination and creativity, as well as physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. All children deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential. The ultimate goal is that they should become decent, moral human beings, working towards the promotion of good and the eradication of evil in society.

19 Sha‘bān 1422 AH / 5 November 2001 CE

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 5.27

<sup>23</sup> Reported in *The Times*, 9 October 1997, p. 1