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THE EDUCATION REFORM ACT: HOW MIXED A BLESSING FOR RE?

In the period between its publication as a draft Bill and the final version as the 1988 Education Reform Act it tripled in length. The additional sections on RE and Worship are part of this expansion. Overall however they represent but one controversial aspect of the legislation amongst many. The others include pupil admissions and parental choice; schools becoming responsible for managing their own finances for staff, buildings and resources; a new category of school permitting those presently maintained by an LEA or Diocese to be opted out from such control; the reorganisation of Higher Education with greater control exercised by the Funding Councils for Polytechnics and Colleges, and for Universities; and the abolition of the ILEA. These add up to quite massive shifts.

The RE & Worship sections of the Act are part of the larger Curriculum specification. Educational organisations and faith communities made extensive representation to the government on its first draft proposals as published in July 1987. Their evidence forms a significant part of the 25000 letters now stored in the DES Library vaults. Ironically, in the case of RE & Worship at least, there is little relationship between the consensus in those letters and the final formulations in the Act. The end result is very different from what any of us would have anticipated 12 months ago. What's ahead is equally uncertain.

1. RE as 'basic' but not 'national'

The preamble to the Act requires that the curriculum in all maintained schools (county, denominational or of new grant status) should promote spiritual, moral and cultural development of all pupils as well as mental and physical. These are fine sounding words but since they receive no further reference or tuning they may remain as unheard background to the rest of the Act as was their subsequent fate when they were included (minus 'cultural') in 1944.

The 'basic curriculum' in all these schools must include RE for all pupils up to the age of 18. This in addition to the ten subjects specified as 'the National Curriculum

RE is not part of the National Curriculum in spite of pressure from the member-organisation of the R. E. Council that it should become so. The reason given by Ministers for this separation is that it was not judged appropriate for the Secretary of State to exercise the same degree of control over RE as over the National Curriculum. For all the National