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Runnymede Response to “The Importance of Teaching” Education White Paper

The proposals set out in the Education White paper published on the 24th November 2010 are ambitious and far-ranging and will have important implications for the education of all children in England, including those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

For this reason we are disappointed that there has not been more effort made to enable citizens, researchers, and organisations who are concerned about race equality to respond to the proposals with a view to ensuring that the reforms lead to better outcomes for all. Giving less than two weeks for groups and individuals to marshal their responses to the White Paper is unacceptable and unlikely to lead to improved policy-making (and even less time to respond to an Equality Impact Assessment that was only made available last week). Further, inviting only schools and local authorities to respond contradicts the assertions in the White Paper itself that communities have a stake in the education system. Nonetheless, we remain committed to working with you to seek reforms that will lead to improved outcomes for all young people, including those who research has shown achieve poorer outcomes from state-sponsored education.

Runnymede is the UK’s leading independent race equality think-tank. We generate intelligence for a multi-ethnic Britain through research, network building, leading debate, and policy engagement. We will follow the process of the White paper into legislation, and working with other organisations and leading-edge research, seek to ensure that the proposed education reforms are fair and lead to schools playing their full role in reducing persistent race inequalities and promoting good relations between people of different backgrounds.

At the initial stages of reading the proposals, we are keen to emphasise a series of principles by which we will be engaging with the reform process. We recognise that the existing systems and policies have not been as effective as we would have hoped in reducing inequality and whilst keen to learn from and maintain effective practice, are not opposed to radical reform in providing the best education for children in England’s schools. However, we remain keen to see that the reforms are based on the best evidence and are sustainable.

Addressing disadvantage – While we welcome the focus on addressing disadvantage in terms of socio-economic status, the Equality Impact Assessment published alongside the White Paper notes that there is also an ‘ethnic penalty’. Steve Strand’s recent analysis undertaken for the Department for Education has highlighted that socio-economic status only explains a part of the levels of underachievement in some ethnic groups. The Pupil Premium and Education Endowment Fund are potentially welcome innovations, although as currently formulated they are unlikely to address ethnic penalties.

Teacher quality – We welcome a focus on teacher quality, but remain concerned about the level of support given to teachers in understanding the diversity of society and effective pedagogies for teaching all children. Newly qualified teachers have consistently reported that they feel poorly prepared to teach in ethnically diverse classrooms. Reforms to teacher education should address this problem so that the workforce is better prepared through initial teacher training or professional development to improve their practice in this regard. Many areas have developed specialist ethnic minority achievement services to support teachers in their efforts to address inequalities. By removing ring-fenced funding these services will be put at risk and their disappearance is likely to have the impact of reducing the system's capacity for change.

It is important for reasons of equity as well as quality that the teaching workforce is ethnically diverse and we would welcome efforts to address the low numbers of teaching staff and those in school leadership positions from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

Accountability – We agree that schools need to be accountable to the communities and neighbourhoods that they serve. For this reason we are concerned about the forms of accountability described in the White paper – from nebulous 'groups' establishing free schools, to overly complex or counter-productive data reducing parental understanding of the school's efforts, to reducing the role of OfSTED.

It is not enough for data to be transparent; it also has to be accessible to all parents. Evidence suggests that for many parents from Black and minority ethnic communities, engagement with the school and its policies is weak. We would be keen to see proposals which began to address this problem; viewing Black and minority ethnic parents as true partners in addressing the educational underachievement still too prevalent for children from some ethnic groups.

Local authorities provided some access to democratic accountability, it remains unclear how accountable schools will be to parents or their communities. We look forward to further clarification of the role of local authorities – in particular in holding schools to account for their performance in promoting equality and good relations as set out in the Equality Act 2010.

OfSTED has sought over recent years to improve its monitoring of practice to promote equality and good relations, after a concerted effort from many parents and community organisations. We are keen not to lose progress in this area and would welcome government proposals to fill this gap if OfSTED's inspection framework is 'simplified'. We are particularly concerned that OfSTED will only inspect schools identified as underperforming. This will undermine schools' ability to learn from effective practice – this is a particular problem for children from minority ethnic backgrounds where practice and outcomes can vary widely between institutions.

Curriculum – The curriculum, as well as providing access to key areas of knowledge, affects levels of engagement and achievement. It has also been used effectively as a tool to promote good relations between people of different backgrounds and to reduce levels of discrimination and bullying. We look forward to engaging with the curriculum review, but would emphasise that reforms should enable and support teachers to employ a curriculum that reflects the diversity of our society, and engages young people from all backgrounds. The White Paper notes that there is a pattern of discrimination in careers advice and guidance that channels certain groups of pupils into 'lower status' qualifications. We would appreciate

proposals that sought to address the quality and effectiveness of independent careers advice and guidance.

Behaviour and exclusions – The disproportionate levels of exclusions for children from some ethnic groups means that reforms in this area are of particular concern to Black and minority ethnic parents and communities. We will respond in greater detail on the proposed changes to exclusions policy at a later date. However, the principle that exclusions should only be used as a last resort and that given their serious impact on a young person’s education and life chances, need an effective form of scrutiny, remains.

Ethnic Segregation – Reforms to admissions systems and the development of new schools, free schools and academies should not exacerbate the levels of segregation in our society. Our research has highlighted that school intakes are more ethnically segregated than our neighbourhoods.¹ This may be an unintended outcome of existing policies, but not a desirable one in terms of promoting good relations or reducing inequalities. The ability of free schools to be established by particular groups will need to be balanced with the requirement that state spending should be focused on providing shared spaces so that people from different backgrounds can meet and work together. Further clarification of the local decision-making structures that will need to be developed so that ethnic segregation between schools is not further entrenched would be welcomed.

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¹ Debbie Weekes-Bernard (2007) School Choice and Ethnic Segregation, Runnymede: London www.runnymedetrust.org

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