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THE RUNNYMEDE TRUST RESPONSE TO

Duty to promote community cohesion: draft guidance for schools

3rd July 2007

We are grateful to be provided with the opportunity to submit our views on the Duty to promote Community Cohesion - draft guidance for schools.

The Runnymede Trust is an independent policy research organisation focusing on equality and justice through the promotion of a successful multi-ethnic society.

Our mandate is to promote a successful multi-ethnic Britain – a Britain where citizens and communities feel valued, enjoy equal opportunities to develop their talents, lead fulfilling lives and accept a collective responsibility, all in the spirit of civic friendship, shared identity and a common sense of belonging. Runnymede has been active in the field of education for many years. Within our current education programme we devise and promote practical strategies for use in the classroom and, at community level, we aim to address and support the specific needs of minority ethnic young people. Further we focus on identifying, sustaining and augmenting improvements in race equality and social cohesion in the changing terrain of education policy and practice.

We broadly welcome the main aims of the Duty to Promote Community Cohesion for schools which include among other areas a focus on emphasising that schools should not only reflect a cohesive society but that they should also contribute to the building of such a society. These are laudable aims and the duty itself can provide the basis for addressing many of the concerns expressed in our recent publication on choice and segregation, specifically in relation to the ability of children and young people currently being educated in segregated schools to learn about those of other ethnicities, faith backgrounds or from different socio-economic groups. We are equally supportive of the focus on admissions within this draft guidance, not only as it is

suggests to schools that they should avoid promoting themselves in such a way as to deter applications for places from parents and children from certain groups but also that schools use this opportunity to look critically at their intake in view of the need to create more cohesive pupil communities.

In view of the above we would like to provide comment on the following areas:

- **Definition of community cohesion**

Providing a definition of community cohesion is indeed helpful as it is necessary that clarity be provided for those schools that may consider themselves to already be working well in this area and for those requiring advice as to how to begin.

We would suggest however that the definition of community cohesion in this regard be signposted as a 'working' definition. Our current work on Faith Schools and Community Cohesion has suggested that stakeholder involvement in the way the concept of community cohesion is defined will not only ensure that it is more locally relevant, which may go some way towards addressing comments raised in the guidance about targeting cohesion activity to the make-up of a school or neighbourhood, but will provide those for whom cohesion will benefit, with a sense of ownership about the way the term is understood.

This will also ensure that diverse groups 'buy into' the process of promoting cohesion within local communities and we would certainly recommend that the final guidance make suggestions as to ways that schools (both faith based and community), and local community stakeholders, which should in our view include representatives from faith organisations, local voluntary/community groups, race equality groups/bodies and local Youth Parliament representatives, work together in forums in order to come to an agreed understanding as to what community cohesion in their local area means to them.

- **The role of schools in promoting community cohesion**

The three areas under which schools should consider the promotion of community cohesion are welcome as they give schools scope to develop a wide range of policies but also importantly reinforce existing areas on which schools should currently be working such as the raising of educational achievement for pupils across all ethnic and faith backgrounds. The links with *Every Child Matters* and the highlighting of the valuable work that can be conducted within the citizenship curriculum is also important.

We would however also welcome a more explicit linking of the community cohesion duty with the race equality duty embedded within the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000. Clearly schools are already under a duty to ensure the raised achievement of pupils of all ethnic groups within their schools, and the promotion of race equality extends both to BME staff and the parents of pupils.

Thus some of what is included within the duty to promote community cohesion should already be undertaken by schools and whilst this provides an ample opportunity to reaffirm to schools that some of these areas they should already be undertaking, there may also be those that

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believe they have done enough work on these ‘issues’ already. It is essential that the two be linked and where necessary the differences between them be earmarked so that schools can see that there may be additional work on cohesion that they need to conduct. The good practice examples will also be of great benefit here as it is necessary to show that there are programmes of work that schools can embark on which are fairly simple – it is essential that this Duty is not seen as simply another initiative that schools feel ‘forced’ to adhere to.

Under ‘Teaching and Learning’ we would suggest that wording include the teaching of ‘empathy’. Our ongoing work on Faith Schools has suggested that simply focusing on encouraging schools to teach pupils about diversity may not be sufficient in order to create a sense of cohesion. Rather than teaching solely about difference, it may be necessary to encourage those from diverse backgrounds to engage children in more generic activity. Children need not learn simply about other faiths, but also ways of living with faith, and indeed of living with difference. Teaching young people thus about empathy, or ‘emotional bonding’, a concept we discussed and developed with young people in earlier work we conducted, may prove to be a more sustainable way of creating cohesive pupil communities. Indeed this may be one way of addressing the difficulties that many White British children experience when discussing diversity in schools, creating a sense of belonging and ownership for all children within a classroom.

Under ‘Engagement and Ethos’, in encouraging schools to engage in larger nework with other schools in order to promote community cohesion, we would encourage that there be a focus on creating activities that are sustainable and long lasting. Where activities are of a temporary nature, this will not provide young people w ith the scope to develop lasting and meaningful friendships with children from different backgrounds.

Finally, as mentioned we welcome the focus on admissions within the guidance. However we do feel that the role of local authorities in assisting schools with the meeting of this specific aspect of the duty be highlighted. Our own work on Choice and segregation highlighted that the drawing up of catchment areas around specific schools should be looked at more critically as given that some schools are now more ethnically segregated than their local neighbourhoods, and that many BME families are restricted to their catchment area schools, much work on this area is to be done if pupil communities are to become truly cohesive. We do not believe that this is something that can be achieved by schools alone and see the Duty to Promote Community Cohesion as an ideal opportunity to address some of these issues.

We hope that these comments provide a useful contribution to the consultation process and look forward to reading the full Guidance on the Duty to Promote Community Cohesion once published.

Yours sincerely

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3 See This is Where I Live (2005) http://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects/whereILive.html
5 Weekes-Bernard ibid