

Reference: First Tier Tribunal (Information Rights) Case No. EA/2014/0017

Notes. The decision notice on this case, dated 24 June 2014 confirmed that ‘the Commissioner requires the Department to take the following steps to ensure compliance with the legislation:

(i) Disclose those extracts of the submission dated 3 August 2010 which fall within the scope of the request, namely, paragraphs 4(ii); 10-15 and Annex A; and

(ii) Disclose the submission dated 23 September 2010 in its entirety save for the third; fourth and fifth sentences of paragraph 16 which are properly withheld under section 42(1).

Both pieces of information are included in this document.

Part (i) extracts from 03 Aug 2010 submission, including Annex A to that submission.

Recommendation

4. That Ministers:

(ii) agree that officials should respond in writing to all Steiner proposals received as attached at Annex A, setting out the policy questions their pedagogical approach raises (as described in paras 10 to 15) and offering a meeting to discuss them;

Suitability of Steiner proposals

10. The Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship claims that Steiner education is part of state funded mainstream provision in most European countries. Its only state funded presence in this country is the Hereford Steiner Academy, which opened in September 2008. It has a Funding Agreement which states it is to manage and develop a school offering a broad curriculum in accordance with the ethos and teachings of Rudolph Steiner.

11. As an Academy, however, it is subject to Section 5 Ofsted inspections as applied to all maintained schools, and the current inspection framework is antithetical to the Steiner ethos/pedagogical approach in the following areas:

- *Literacy in Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 (KS1)* differ from both the National Curriculum and the inspection framework. In the Steiner Kindergarten (4-6 yrs of age) the focus is on physical growth and movement, imaginative child generated play, imitation and “eurythmical”¹ activities. Formal learning follows in the age 7-12 age group. It was agreed by Ministers in the previous government that the Academy would not have to conduct National Curriculum Tests at KS1, but would do so at KS2. However, the inspection framework is predicated on more formal learning - especially writing in EYFS and KS1, and in the Ofsted monitoring visit this was a difficulty. The Steiner Academy has since asked for dis-application of the EYFS.
- *KS2 Tests.* The school did meet the requirement of making the appropriate arrangements for KS2 tests last summer, but all parents refused to allow their children to take them and requested alternative education. When Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) visited last November the Academy had no data on attainment at KS2 and HMIE judged from lesson observations that they were not making sufficient progress at this key stage (see Annex B for full report).
- *Teaching and learning.* The Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship argues that children need time to reflect on what teachers teach and that gains in learning are not immediately apparent but emerge later. Therefore any process which judges learning as the immediate outcome from teaching in a lesson is inappropriate. This is in clear opposition to the Section 5 inspection

¹ A Steiner website defines eurhythm as “a dance-like art form in which music or speech are expressed in bodily movement; specific movements correspond to particular notes or sounds.”

framework.

12. Officials have been meeting with Ofsted to try and resolve these issues as the Academy is due a Section 5 inspection next year, (before the framework is changed from September 2011). It is likely to be judged inadequate as its provision does not meet the framework requirements. The outcomes at age 16 are however above national standards. We are continuing to work with Ofsted on agreeing a way forward. The independent school inspection framework is based on compliance with the regulatory standards which all independent schools must meet as a condition of their registration with the Department. Inspections against the framework are conducted either by Ofsted, or by a body approved by the Secretary of State. Independent Steiner schools are inspected by the School Inspection Service (SIS) which has been approved to inspect these schools and those affiliated to Focus Learning Trust (the educational arm of the Exclusive Brethren). Ofsted has to date been unwilling to support applications for any school exemption from Section 5 inspections, because of the precedent that would establish.

13. In addition to concerns around the Steiner pedagogical approach, there is also a handling/presentation risk given the racist and anti-Semitic nature of some of Rudolph Steiner's writings. The Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship website clearly and prominently states on its homepage:

"The SWSF is opposed to all forms of discrimination against any person or group of people on the grounds of race, gender, faith, disability, age and sexual orientation and is committed to promoting equality of opportunity and reflecting the diversity of the children, staff and parents served by Steiner schools. We also reject any racism stated or implied in any of Rudolf Steiner's speeches and writings (dating from the mid-1880s to his death in 1925)."

14. Similarly, the website states "The Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship acknowledges Rudolf Steiner as the founding inspiration of modern day Steiner schools, but does not promote Anthroposophy or endorse every aspect of it." Anthroposophy is a spiritual philosophy founded by Rudolf Steiner, which postulates the existence of an objective, intellectually comprehensible spiritual world accessible to direct experience through "inner development". In its investigations of the spiritual world, anthroposophy aims to attain the precision of natural science's investigations of the physical world. Regardless of the Fellowship's public stance on anthroposophy, any perceived endorsement by the Department of such a philosophy may attract unfavourable media attention. Officials are also in receipt of correspondence from concerned parents who had placed their children in Steiner schools, citing teaching staff's affirmation of anthroposophy, a fatalistic approach to illiteracy in some children, and a refusal to respond to complaints about allegedly racist conduct by staff.

15. Due to the concerns outlined in paragraphs 11 and 12, we recommend that officials send the letter attached in draft form as Annex A, confirming that we would need to resolve these issues in order to progress any Free School proposals from the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship.

DRAFT LETTER TO STEINER FREE SCHOOL APPLICANTS

Dear

Thank you again for submitting your proposal to establish a Free School.

Steiner proposals raise some policy questions for the Department, particularly around the approach to early years education, tests at Key Stage 2 and compatibility with the Ofsted framework.

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these questions with you and ask therefore that you contact me at the above number below to arrange a meeting at a mutually convenient time.

Yours sincerely,

Relevant Deputy Director

Part (ii) Submission dated 23 September 2010

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE

From: [REDACTED]

Tel: [REDACTED]

Date: 23 September 2010

Copy: PS/Gibb
PS/Hill
Permanent Secretary
PS/Advisers
Peter Houten
David Jeffrey
Penny Jones
[REDACTED]
Lesley Longstone
[REDACTED]
Mela Watts
And others at end

STEINER SCHOOLS – HANDLING PRESENTATIONAL RISKS

Issue

1. To note the key points contained in parental complaints to officials about Steiner schools, the accompanying presentational risks of approving Steiner Free School proposals, and a corresponding handling plan.

Recommendation

2. That the Secretary of State notes:
- (a) the complaints summarised in this submission and the media risks arising from them; and
 - (b) the proposed lines to take in paragraph 20.

Summary

3. Officials have received a number of complaints from aggrieved parents making allegations about the impact of the Steiner philosophy in some schools.

Some of these allegations are very serious, including racist abuse by other pupils which the school allegedly failed to act upon despite repeated complaints, and the use of racial epithets by teachers. The parents have provided officials with large amounts of material to substantiate their allegations and have repeatedly asked for reassurances that Ministers will not fund or support Steiner schools. We are not sure of the extent of the anti-Steiner movement (that is referred to in the materials provided) or how widespread the dissatisfaction from parents is. Our experience of the Steiner Academy in Hereford does not reflect these concerns. However, in the event of a Steiner Free School being approved, there may be some associated handling risks. This submission briefly summarises the material the parents have supplied, set in the context of our knowledge of Steiner independent schools and the Steiner Academy, and sets out a high level handling plan including lines to take in the event of a successful Steiner proposal for a Free School.

Timing

4. Routine.

Background

5. Officials in Academies Group have worked closely with members of the Steiner Fellowship over several years, in the establishment and running of the Steiner Academy in Hereford. Steiner representatives have been willing to compromise on various aspects of their beliefs in order to sign the Academy funding agreement, including, for example, appointing a principal and providing for the pupils to sit the Key Stage 2 tests. Officials in Free Schools Group met a large group of Steiner representatives this week to explain the process of applying to become a Free School. Five Steiner schools have already applied, and several more are considering it.

6. As the Secretary of State is aware though, the Department has received concerns from two parents surrounding the treatment of their mixed-race child at a Steiner school, including racist abuse by other pupils which the school allegedly failed to act upon despite repeated complaints, and the use of racial epithets by teachers. Officials met the parents who provided a large amount of material on the anthroposophical basis of Steiner pedagogy and its apparently racist nature, and a critique of the Steiner approach to literacy and numeracy, bullying and transparency to parents.

7. We cannot reliably establish the extent of the anti-Steiner movement, and have only seen materials provided by dissatisfied parents. Officials have received several emails since the meeting, from the two parents and others, asking for assurances that the Secretary of State has seen the materials they provided and what decisions have been made on funding any Steiner Free Schools. Given their interest and the fact they have met officials from the Department, it seems likely that they will contact the media if a Steiner Free School is announced.

8. This submission summarises the materials received, and suggests lines to take in response to criticism if a Steiner Free School is approved.

Summary of materials

Influence and racist nature of anthroposophy

9. According to the materials provided, Steiner education is said to be founded on spiritual rather than educational principles and concepts. The materials indicate

that the curriculum is structured around the spiritual philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, called anthroposophy (spiritual science), which includes the belief in the reincarnation of the spirit through the races, from Black to Aryan. There is a job description for a classroom teacher for a Steiner school in Norwich which states that candidates must have a 'genuine commitment to anthroposophy and Steiner education'. To become a Steiner teacher you undertake a 'certificate in anthroposophical studies' which includes 'evolution of human consciousness', 'occult science', and 'towards the consciousness soul'.

10. Racist elements of Steiner's writings were highlighted in the material, including statements such as "blond hair actually bestows intelligence. In the case of fair people, less nourishment is driven into the eyes and hair; it remains instead in the brain and endows it with intelligence".

Approach to literacy and numeracy

8. A concern raised by the two parents and in various items of official correspondence, is the Steiner approach to not teaching basic literacy and numeracy until children have their adult teeth, and that parents are strongly encouraged to withdraw their children from sitting SATs.

9. With the Steiner Academy, we agreed when negotiating their funding agreement that they would be exempt from Key Stage 1 tests but that they would participate in tests at Key Stage 2, so Ofsted could assess pupil performance. Last year, the Academy pupils did not sit the tests (the Academy provided the exam papers and rooms for pupils to sit the exams but parents chose not to allow their pupils to sit the tests).

Approach to bullying

10. A recurring theme in the material provided is that bullying is not tackled within Steiner schools. One parent complains that they witnessed a physical attack on their son where a teacher failed to intervene, and subsequently justified this approach by claiming the children were 'working out their karma'. A teacher training document entitled *How should bullying be handled?* asks "can a child's karma or destiny be that of a victim or bully? It is a child's destiny to seek certain experiences to build his or her self-esteem and inner self. Should a potentially abusive situation be stopped, and if so, at what point?" It goes on to state "there are normal levels of aggressive behaviour particularly as children are exploring the cruel aspects of their nature. Every school provides the opportunity for some bullying to take place, as children test each other out and work out their roles in the classroom and playground relationships."

11. In addition to the material provided by parents, the Department's Independent Schools team is aware of serious complaints of staff bullying pupils in 8 of the existing 25 registered independent Steiner schools. In several of the cases of bullying complaints, there is also a concern about the way the school has handled the allegations, failing to investigate accusations of bullying and physical abuse by teachers in some cases.

12. Stephen Williams MP wrote to Nick Gibb in June about the difficulties his constituent's son has experienced at Bristol Steiner School. His constituent has said that his son has been bullied, which has not been addressed by the school, and that the school management structure is inadequate to deal with these issues and to respond to complaints from parents. The Department asked the Schools Inspection

Service to conduct an unannounced inspection to look at supervision levels and procedures to deal with bullying, which will take place this term.

13. In four Steiner schools, the Department has received complaints about physical abuse from teachers towards pupils, including spitting in a pupil's face, making sexual innuendos and throwing a rounders bat at a pupil. At one school, a teacher was allowed to continue teaching for two days after a pupil reported that they had made inappropriate suggestions to them. The pupils were encouraged to visit the teacher at his home to deliver flowers and gifts and parents were asked if their sons and daughters could contribute towards a leaving gift. The school did refer the teacher to the local authority and he was arrested following an admission of guilt. The local authority is concerned about the way the school handled the situation and the Schools Inspection Service will inspect the school this autumn to look at safeguarding procedures. At another school, Ofsted found management worryingly unsatisfactory and a failure to deal with physical abuse by teachers and child protection issues.

14. Free Schools are required to follow existing legislation which requires head teachers to take measures aimed at preventing all forms of bullying. In addition, the independent schools standards require independent schools to have regard to Departmental guidance on tackling bullying. While that guidance does not require schools to use particular strategies, the approach reportedly used by Steiner schools would not accord with the overall approach indicated in our guidance. We would need to assure ourselves, in discussion with the Steiner fellowship, that a Steiner Free School will have sufficient anti-bullying policies in place. Bullying has not been an issue at the Steiner Academy.

Lack of transparency

15. A common accusation from correspondents is that the movement is not transparent – not only about the influence of anthroposophy and its in principle opposition to SATs, but also about what takes place in the classroom. Officials are in receipt of Steiner teacher training materials that imply a highly secretive approach to what takes place in class, stating teachers should “...never allow anyone access to lesson notes or records’ and ‘anything indicating what the class may have learnt, or covered in Morning Lesson should be ‘lost’ before you leave the school.”

Responding to the concerns

16. Despite the concerns with Steiner schools summarised above, it is important to state that when deciding whether to approve a Free School proposal, the Secretary of State will judge each case on its merits. Taking the same approach with Steiner would mean that we do not use the material provided by the parents about specific cases in particular schools as the basis for our approach to all Steiner schools. We should discuss any concerns with the Steiner Fellowship and give them an opportunity to address them.

17. We have no evidence that any of the allegations and approaches outlined above are found in the Hereford Steiner Academy, which received a monitoring visit from Ofsted last year.

Presentation

18. If the Secretary of State funds Steiner Free Schools, it is likely that the parent groups will seek media attention and will provide the media with the material

which they claim indicates the racist motives of Steiner education. The Department has also received several pieces of correspondence asking for reassurance that Steiner schools will not be state funded.

19. Officials will work with press office to produce a reactive media and communications handling plan based on the lines to take below. It will be important to stress that a state-funded Steiner Academy already exists (Steiner Academy Hereford), that each Free School proposal will be carefully screened for extremist values and that the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship has publicly distanced itself from any racism stated or implied in the writings of Rudolf Steiner.

Lines to take

20. In the event that Ministers do approve Steiner Free School proposals, we suggest the following key lines to take in response to any public or media criticism:

- As has been made clear repeatedly, the Secretary of State would not countenance approving any proposals that endorse racism or run counter to the UK's democratic values; the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship has clearly and publicly distanced itself from any racism stated or implied in the writings of Rudolf Steiner;
- The Steiner Waldorf Fellowship has also publicly affirmed that it does not promote anthroposophy or endorse every aspect of it;
- It would be neither fair nor logical to assess proposals for new Steiner schools on the basis of complaints or allegations from parents in other Steiner schools – just as each Catholic or Jewish school is different, so is each Steiner school. Each Free School proposal is assessed on its merits;
- Providing all parents with the choice currently only available to those with the ability to pay is at the heart of the Free School policy – enabling access to alternative pedagogies such as Steiner and Montessori that many parents currently pay for is an example of that expansion of choice;
- As Academies, all Free Schools will of course be accountable to both the Secretary of State and Ofsted, and any complaints regarding the conduct of staff or content of teaching will be taken very seriously.

21. Officials will also need to respond to the parents and other correspondents who have complained to the Department and asked for assurances that Steiner schools will not receive state funding. This will take very careful handling. We propose to respond using the lines set out above, emphasising first that the Secretary of State assesses each proposal individually and on its own merits, and that he would never consider approving a proposal where he had any concern about what was being taught or the suitability of the proposers. We will also highlight the importance of choice for parents, and the requirement on Free Schools to make clear in their information to parents what their ethos and philosophy consists of.

Finance

22. There are no financial implications associated with the recommendations set out in this submission.

Internal Clearance

23. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Mela Watts

Copy list continued: [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] [REDACTED]