

BHA BRIEFING: Creationist groups approved to run Free Schools

18 July 2012



Briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA)

Three proposed Free Schools – Grindon Hall Christian School, Exemplar – Newark Business Academy and Sevenoaks Christian School – wish to teach creationism. Two of these groups have previously supported teaching creationism in science as a valid scientific theory, and now propose teaching creationism in Religious Education. The third intends to teach about creationism in RE.

This two-page briefing sets out questions around these groups, before looking in more detail at each group in turn in three pages of appendices.

All three groups are supportive of teaching theories running contrary to evolution

- Grindon Hall Christian School's 'Creation Policy' advocates a 'Teach the controversy' approach, giving an unsure position that considers both evolution and creationism as plausible. This includes statements that 'We believe that God, as sovereign Lord of the universe, is capable of creating the world in a few 24-hour days' and 'We will affirm that to believe in God's creation of the world is an entirely respectable position scientifically and rationally.'¹
- Exemplar Academy's bid is the successor to last year's bid to establish Everyday Champions Academy, sponsored by Everyday Champions Church;² with regards to that bid, Church pastor Gareth Morgan stated that 'Creationism will be taught as the belief of the leadership of the school. It will not be taught exclusively in the sciences, for example. At the same time, evolution will be taught as a theory.'³ That bid was rejected by the Government solely because Michael Gove 'was unable to accept that an organisation with creationist beliefs could prevent these views being reflected in the teaching in the school and in its other activities.'⁴
- Sevenoaks Christian School state on their website that 'The government has said that free schools cannot teach "creationism" or "intelligent design" in science lessons as an alternative to the theory of evolution and we are content to accept this.'⁵ It is clear that the second sentence of this statement is referring to theories which run contrary to evolution. This is because it refers to creationism and intelligent design in the context of scientific teaching, and furthermore, a central tenet of intelligent design is the rejection of natural selection, the process which drives evolution.⁶ Finally, the phrasing of this statement seems clear to the BHA as saying that were it not for the Government's rules against teaching creationism and intelligent design in science lessons, the school would do this.

All groups say they will not teach creationism in science – but will teach it in RE

Grindon Hall Christian School's 'Creation Policy' states that 'We will teach creation as a scientific theory'; however, when they had this policy challenged, the group then stated that they will now teach creationism in assemblies and RE.⁷ Exemplar Academy, when bidding as Everyday Champions Church, intended to teach

¹ <http://www.grindonhall.com/documents/Creation%20Policy.doc>

² John Birch, 'Christian ethos at heart of new free school bid', *Newark Advertiser*, 17 January 2012: <http://www.newarkadvertiser.co.uk/articles/news/Christian-ethos-at-heart-of-new-free-school-b>

³ Richard Vaughan, 'Evangelicals' free school would include creationism on science curriculum', *The TES*, 4 February 2012: <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6069260>

⁴ 'Everyday Champions Church Free School bid rejected due to creationism', British Humanist Association, 14 October 2012: <http://www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/910>

⁵ http://www.sevenoakschristianschool.org.uk/?page_id=56

⁶ See the Discovery Institute's FAQ:

<http://www.discovery.org/csc/topQuestions.php#questionsAboutIntelligentDesign> – the Discovery Institute coined and promulgated the term 'intelligent design'.

⁷ Jeevan Vasagar, 'Creationist groups win Michael Gove's approval to open free schools', *The Guardian*, 18 July 2012, p. 2: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jul/17/creationist-groups-approval-free-schools>

creationism in science, but now only intends to teach it in RE.⁸ Sevenoaks Christian School's website makes clear to the BHA that they would teach creationism in science if they were allowed to, but also says that they will only teach creationism (and only *about* creationism) in RE.

Free Schools are not allowed to advocate creationism in RE, just as any other subject

Section 24A of the Free School Model Funding Agreement states that Free Schools 'shall not make provision in the context of any subject for the teaching, as an evidence-based view or theory, of any view or theory that is contrary to established scientific and/or historical evidence and explanations.'⁹ This rule applies to all subjects, not just to science.

Furthermore, Nick Gibb stated last year that 'In Religious Education... religious beliefs should... not be presented as scientific theory. As with any other subject in the curriculum, RE should be taught in an objective, impartial and accurate manner, and on no account should it be used as an opportunity for those of a particular faith to attempt to embed their own particular views or beliefs into children.'

Risks involved

It is worth noting that it is quite common for primary schools to teach about the Christian, Jewish or Muslim creation narrative, as it is a prominent story in the Bible. But it is extremely rare for a secondary school to do likewise, and this raises concerns that this school is intending to promote creationist views to their students as a valid theory – contrary to Nick Gibb's statement about RE above.¹⁰

Furthermore, it does not seem to the BHA to be worth the risk to fund creationist groups if they promise not to teach creationism. Last year, Michael Gove seemed to agree when the Department for Education said that 'He was unable to accept that an organisation with creationist beliefs could prevent these views being reflected in the teaching in the school and in its other activities.' It is far from clear why these schools have been approved, in light of this statement and the evidence about them.

Conclusion

Given these three groups' backgrounds and statements about intended teaching, it appears to us that the Government have either failed to scrutinise these bids, or has gone back on its previous statements. We would like to see all three bids rejected by the Government.

About the BHA

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. It is the largest organisation in the UK campaigning for an end to religious privilege and to discrimination based on religion or belief, and for a secular state.

The BHA has a long history of contributing towards and improving state education. We provide materials and advice to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics. We also work closely with others on wider equalities issues in a range of forums. The BHA is a member of the National Children's Bureau Sex Education Forum (SEF), the Children's Rights Alliance for England and the Religious Education Council for England and Wales.

For more details, information and evidence, contact the British Humanist Association:

Pavan Dhaliwal
Head of Public Affairs
0773 843 5059
020 7079 3585
pavan@humanism.org.uk
www.humanism.org.uk
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⁸ Poppy McPherson, 'Creationists to open free school', *The Independent*, 14 July 2012, p. 10:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/creationists-to-open-free-school-7942395.html>

⁹ <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/freeschools/a0074737/free-schools-model-funding-agreement>

¹⁰ Letter dated 7 July 2011 from Nick Gibb MP to Hugo Swire MP in response to concerns of Laura Horner

Appendix: Grindon Hall Christian School

Grindon Hall Christian School is a private all-through school that was backed by the Government to become a Free School designated with a Christian religious character in October 2011. The school is due to open in September 2012. Most Free Schools due to open in September signed their funding agreement (giving them final approval) in June; however, for some reason Grindon Hall is yet to do so.¹¹

Grindon Hall has on its website a 'Creation Policy'.¹² This one-page document advocates a 'Teach the controversy' approach, giving an unsure position that considers both evolution and creationism as plausible. In full, this states that (emphasis added):

We will affirm the fact that "God created the world and everything in it". We will affirm that he did so "ex nihilo" – out of nothing.

We believe that God, as sovereign Lord of the universe, is capable of creating the world in a few 24-hour days, or over a period of millions of years.

We do not share the rigid creationist's insistence on a literalistic interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. We believe it is honouring to, and consistent with a belief in, the inerrant Word of God to accept that the opening chapters of Genesis, as do many other places in Scripture, contain much that appears to be poetic. Thus, to insist on a literalistic interpretation of the passage(s) in question – which most Christians certainly do not feel obliged to do in regard to other instances of poetry and apocalyptic writings in the Bible - might in fact be very mistaken.

We are therefore very happy to believe that God could have created the world in six days. But we do not feel that it is helpful to affirm it as an unarguable fact.

We do not believe that the very plain evidence supporting a lengthy process of evolution needs to be challenged by Christians.

However, we vigorously challenge the unscientific certainty often claimed by scientists surrounding the so-called "Big Bang" and origins generally.

We believe that no scientific theory provides – or ever will provide – a satisfactory explanation of origins, i.e. why the world appeared, and how nothing became something in the first place.

We will teach evolution as an established scientific principle, as far as it goes.

We will teach creation as a scientific theory and we will always affirm very clearly our position as Christians, i.e. that Christians believe that God's creation of the world is not just a theory but a fact with eternal consequences for our planet and for every person who has ever lived on it.

We will affirm that to believe in God's creation of the world is an entirely respectable position scientifically and rationally.

Grindon Hall principal Chris Gray responded in the Guardian to the publicising of this document by saying that the document is out of date, and that the school would not teach creationism in science:¹³

'First of all, it's illegal. Secondly, we were questioned at length about it when we were interviewed to be a free school, and that was to the [Department for Education]'s satisfaction. A number of schools have been sadly turned down on that. That document is from a time when we were not as clear as we are now about the proper distinction as to what is taught in a science lesson and what might be taught in assembly – two different spheres.

'If children question for themselves their origins, that's what we want them to do – to ask sensible, responsible questions. Am I here by accident, or – dare I use the word – design?'

From this, it is clear that the school supports teaching views opposed to evolution in science as a valid scientific theory, and has been doing so as a private school. However, as the Government won't let it do so as a Free School, it intends instead to teach creationism in Religious Education and assemblies – still as a valid, evidence-based theory.

¹¹ See 'FREE SCHOOL UPDATE on 14th July 2012' at <http://www.grindonhall.com/homepage.asp>

¹² <http://www.grindonhall.com/documents/Creation%20Policy.doc>

¹³ Jeevan Vasagar, 'Creationist groups win Michael Gove's approval to open free schools', *The Guardian*, 18 July 2012, p. 2: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jul/17/creationist-groups-approval-free-schools>

Appendix: Exemplar – Newark Business Academy

Exemplar – Newark Business Academy is a proposal for a secondary school that was backed by the Government this month to open from September 2013. The proposed school is not intended to be formally designated as having a Christian character, but nonetheless adopting a Christian ethos. Academies and Free Schools can have a religious character without formally registering as ‘faith’ schools: these ‘faith ethos’ schools, as they are known, nonetheless have control over the curriculum and are able to use a Genuine Occupational Requirement in appointing senior staff.¹⁴

The group behind the bid for Exemplar Academy also last year bid to open a Free School under the name of Everyday Champions Academy. That bid was for a school formally designated as Christian, and with the formal backing of Everyday Champions Church. The bid provoked controversy in February 2011 when Gareth Morgan, the Church’s pastor, stated that ‘Creationism will be taught as the belief of the leadership of the school. It will not be taught exclusively in the sciences, for example. At the same time, evolution will be taught as a theory.’ The church website also carried a video that states: ‘If creation is true, there is a purpose to life. If evolution is true, there is no purpose to life... if creation is true, then man is a fallen creature and we need a saviour. If evolution is true then man is an evolving creature and we don’t need any saviour.’¹⁵

In October, the school’s bid was rejected. The Church was told by the Department for Education that the sole reason for rejection was that ‘The Secretary of State carefully considered your application, the views and beliefs of your organisation as set out in your application, your responses at interview and information about your organisation available in the public domain. **He was unable to accept that an organisation with creationist beliefs could prevent these views being reflected in the teaching in the school and in its other activities.** It is his firm view that the teaching of creationist views as a potentially valid alternative theory is not acceptable in a 21st century state funded school.’¹⁶

In January 2012, the group decided to bid again, this time for Exemplar Academy and without the formal backing of the church. However, the website for the new Academy was initially at exactly the same web address as the previous one, within the Everyday Champions Church website; the website is no longer live, but the domain is registered to ‘Everyday Champions Centre’, paid for under the Church’s charitable status;¹⁷ and the school has a group on LinkedIn, with the owner listed as Gareth Morgan.¹⁸ A slight minority of the proposing team’s members come from Everyday Champions Church;¹⁹ however, **the plans were launched at the Church, being described as a ‘resubmission’ of the previous bid.** The group commented that ‘The school will be run on Christian values and we are proud of that. There is a huge difference between Christian values and Christian theology, which is why the original bid was turned down.’²⁰

¹⁴ For more details, read the BHA briefing note, ‘“Faith ethos” Academies and Free Schools explained’, April 2012: <http://www.humanism.org.uk/uploads/documents/bha-briefing-faith-ethos-academies-and-free-schools-explained.pdf>

¹⁵ Richard Vaughan, ‘Evangelicals’ free school would include creationism on science curriculum’, *The TES*, 4 February 2012: <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6069260>

¹⁶ ‘Everyday Champions Church Free School bid rejected due to creationism’, British Humanist Association, 14 October 2012: <http://www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/910>

¹⁷ <http://whois.domaintools.com/exemplaracademy.org.uk>

¹⁸ <http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Exemplar-Academy-Newarks-Business-Academy-4248529/about?trk=anet Ug grppro>

¹⁹ Lucy Millard, ‘Church role sidelined in school bid’, *Newark Advertiser*, 12 January 2012: <http://www.newarkadvertiser.co.uk/articles/news/Church-role-sidelined-in-school-bid>

²⁰ John Birch, ‘Christian ethos at heart of new free school bid’, *Newark Advertiser*, 17 January 2012: <http://www.newarkadvertiser.co.uk/articles/news/Christian-ethos-at-heart-of-new-free-school-bid>

This month, the proposals were approved. In response to the subsequent media controversy surrounding the bid, the group said that they will not teach creationism in science. However, they positively stated that they would teach creationism in RE.²¹

It is quite common for primary schools to teach about the Christian, Jewish or Muslim creation narrative, as it is a prominent story in the Bible. But it is extremely rare for a secondary school to do likewise, and combined with the history of this proposal, the above statement implies that the school is intending to promote creationist views to their students as a valid theory.

Finally, it is far from clear why Michael Gove has changed his views from when his Department stated that ‘He was unable to accept that an organisation with creationist beliefs could prevent these views being reflected in the teaching in the school and in its other activities.’

Appendix: Sevenoaks Christian School

Sevenoaks Christian School is a proposal for a secondary school that was backed by the Government this month to open from September 2013. The proposed school will be formally designated as a Christian school.

In an FAQ on the school’s website, the group state:²²

‘Will you teach creationism?’

‘Christians believe that God made the world, loves the world and is pleased with his creation. In RE we plan to teach about this and our responsibility as stewards of this precious earth. The government has said that free schools cannot teach “creationism” or “intelligent design” in science lessons as an alternative to the theory of evolution and we are content to accept this.’

It is clear that the second sentence of this statement is referring to theories which run contrary to evolution. This is because it refers to creationism and intelligent design in the context of scientific teaching, and furthermore, a central tenet of intelligent design is the rejection of natural selection, the process which drives evolution.²³

The phrasing of this statement seems clear to the BHA, in the second sentence, as saying that were it not for the Government’s rules against teaching creationism and intelligent design in science lessons, the school would do this. It is therefore a reasonable concern that there is a high risk that the school will teach views opposed to evolution in RE. Furthermore, as the Department for Education said last year that Michael Gove ‘was unable to accept that an organisation with creationist beliefs could prevent these views being reflected in the teaching in the school and in its other activities’, it is unclear why they think it is possible for this school.

With that said, the first part of the sentence does make clear that the school will only teach *about* creationism. It is quite common for primary schools to teach about the Christian, Jewish or Muslim creation narrative, as it is a prominent story in the Bible. But it is extremely rare for a secondary school to do likewise, and this raises concerns that this school is intending to promote creationist views to their students as a valid theory.

²¹ Poppy McPherson, ‘Creationists to open free school’, *The Independent*, 14 July 2012, p. 10: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/creationists-to-open-free-school-7942395.html>

²² http://www.sevenoakschristianschool.org.uk/?page_id=56

²³ See the Discovery Institute’s FAQ: <http://www.discovery.org/csc/topQuestions.php#questionsAboutIntelligentDesign> – the Discovery Institute coined and promulgated the term ‘intelligent design’.