



Education



The school system in Wales can be traced back to Christian churches providing education with their circulating schools of the 18th century. The Church in Wales and the Roman Catholic Church continue to be direct providers of education, and all churches in Wales are involved in the education system through the Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs), and through many other formal and informal local, county and national partnerships.

The churches of Wales supported the recommendations and plans outlined by the outgoing Welsh Government in *Successful Futures* (the 'Donaldson Report' on the national curriculum, 2015) and *Qualified for Life: A curriculum for Wales – a curriculum for life* (regarding teacher training) for learners in Wales to “enjoy teaching and learning that inspires them to succeed, in an education community that works cooperatively and aspires to be great, where the potential of every child and young person is actively developed”. These proposals also received cross-party support in the National Assembly. The current timetable is for them to be developed in 'Pioneer Schools' until 2018, then gradually rolled out for full implementation in every school in Wales in September 2021.

There remain, however, a number of detailed concerns:

- The principal examination board for Wales, the WJEC, is currently proposing the introduction of new GCSE and A level specifications from September 2016. There is concern at the short lead-in time for schools, and that the new specifications prejudice the outcome of the curriculum reform process.
- The curriculum reform brings together History, Geography, Religion, Philosophy and Ethics in a new 'Humanities' area. What future is there for Humanities subjects in terms of time, status and resources? How will Religious Education be taught as part of this new subject area?
- Local government reform, as proposed by some parties, would mean a considerable change in the structure of Local Education Authorities. How would this affect the advisory and support services currently provided by regional consortia?
- There is concern that the new initial teacher training model should be a consistent one across Wales.

Church schools

Catholic and Church in Wales schools and colleges across Wales seek to develop fully the God-given gifts of every child, believing every child to be a child of God. Significant numbers of parents of other churches and faiths also choose to send their children to these schools. The European Convention of Human Rights, Article 2 of Protocol 1, sets out that governments should “respect the right of parents to ensure education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions”.

There is particular concern that in implementing home-school transport arrangements, local authorities should be willing to regard the nearest Church school as the nearest ‘suitable school’, and that transport should be provided on the same terms as it is for learners in other maintained schools in Wales.

Welsh medium education

Churches and chapels in Wales were involved in pioneering Welsh-medium schools, many of which began in the vestries of local churches. Demand for Welsh-medium education in formerly English-speaking areas continues to grow, and some local authorities struggle to meet the demand. However, there is evidence of a decline in take-up of Welsh-medium education, especially at secondary age, in some of the former heartlands of the Welsh language.

RhAG, the campaign for Welsh-medium education, is calling on the next Welsh Government to introduce a stronger and more consistent policy for Welsh-medium education¹. The current government has indicated sympathy with the idea of removing the distinction between ‘first-language’ and ‘second-language’ Welsh qualifications, aiming for all pupils to be proficiently bilingual by the age of 16².

Questions for candidates

- In a period of continued cutbacks, how much funding will education be given in the next Welsh Government budget?
- GCSE and A level results have improved again this year, which is heartening. But how could these results be improved further, given we still lag behind England?
- What plans does the Welsh Government have to support and further Welsh-medium education in Wales?
- Do you support the continued teaching of Religious Education in schools in Wales? What do you think should be included in the curriculum? Who do you think should decide?

References

- 1 www.rhag.net/stori.php?iaith=eng&id=181 (viewed 13 January 2016)
- 2 <http://cymdeithas.cymru/news/first-minister-abolish-second-language-welsh-cymdeithas-welcomes-commitment-learning-continuum> (viewed 18 January 2016)

