

'Questions...
but only
soft answers'

The SES and its strange schools

From The Standard of June 9.

Cult schools: parents seek a bigger say



DAVID BODDY—Defending schools.

PARENTS of pupils at three London independent schools which The Standard has revealed are run by a secretive religious cult last night had an opportunity to hear teaching staff answer criticism.

The majority of parents are members of the cult—called the School of Economic Science—but a quarter have no connection with it. Many of this group were unaware of the connection.

Some of the parents are considering taking their children away from the schools after attending the meeting and listening to the head teachers' answers to questions.

More than 500 parents at the meeting in Kensington heard senior staff at the schools defend their unorthodox teaching methods—which include Sanskrit chants and meditation—and their disciplinary practices.

There were denials of allegations from some parents that without their knowledge small children in the primary school were beaten with rulers.

A Standard investigation last week revealed that St James School for Boys, St James School for Girls and St Vedast School for Girls, based at premises in Queen's Gate, Kensington, and Chepstow Villas, Notting Hill Gate, are run by the School of Economic Science.

Mystic

The School of Economic Science has been condemned by several prominent churchmen, including the Bishop of Woolwich, after claims that some members suffered mental disorders and marital break-ups because of their involvement with the organisation.

A question about the cult is to be asked at the Church of England's General Synod later this year by the Dean of St Albans.

The SES preaches a mixture of Eastern and Western philosophies—drawing much of its guidance from a Hindu mystic in India.

Once past the initiate stage, adult followers are expected to follow strict guidelines about the way they live their lives.

They must show obedience to their superiors in the movement and seek permission for major decisions in their lives—including marriage, child-bearing and change of job.

Many of the parents at the three schools—and a fourth, St Vedast School for Boys in West Heath Road, Hampstead, where parents meet tonight—are members of the SES.

They claim the organisation does much good in the world and are happy to have their

children brought up to follow its beliefs.

But other parents were unaware of the connection between the independent schools and the cult. Until The Standard's article they did not realise that SES philosophy was taught in the classroom.

After last night's meeting, four families, none of them members of the SES, said they now had grave doubts about the running of the schools and the influence over them of the School of Economic Science.

Punishment

One couple said they had already arranged for their child to have an interview at another school. The others said they were considering taking similar action.

All have requested not to be named in case their children might be identified. One mother explained: "Until we saw the article in The Standard last week we had no idea what the School of Economic Science was."

Her husband added: "We should have been told about the connection between the day schools and this cult. I don't want my children being indoctrinated."

"Nor do I want my child to believe in it."

Another parent said: "None of the school's pamphlets say anything about the SES or the use of corporal punishment. I was told there was none. But now, after speaking to other parents, I realise this isn't the case."

Another couple worried that the meeting had not quelled their worries about the day schools praised The Standard.

The wife said: "The Standard has done a lot of good in raising questions that need to be raised."

Her husband said: "I'm not convinced the intentions of the SES are evil, but what I do know is I don't believe in it."

Demands were made at the meeting by non-SES parents for the immediate formation of a Parent/Teachers Association and representation on the Board of Governors for non-members of the cult.

Leading the call was barrister Mr Stephen Desch, who has a young daughter at St James. He said: "As things stand at the moment the charge of secrecy which has been levelled against the SES and the schools is one which has a considerable air of verisimilitude."

"It is that which has caused concern to myself and is the main element of concern among those whose views I have heard, directly or indirectly."

Referring to The Standard's

inquiry, he said: "Whether these articles are true or false, or a mixture of truth and falsehood, they have gravely shaken among a number of parents the trust at the heart of the success of the schools."

He added: "There is a feeling among a number of parents that in the past, when they have asked questions or made points, they have received soft answers to turn away wrath and nothing has been done about it."

"A PTA would, I hope, provide an organised form of seeing that areas of concern among parents have things done about them if necessary, and particularly would ensure that where areas of anxiety were raised—for example, corporal punishment—a consistent answer is given."

"I use that simply as an example where the teachers are saying that one thing happens and parents are hearing that there is another."

Journalist Sue Arnold, who has three daughters at the school, also supported the call for a PTA.

She said: "I do not agree with corporal punishment and feel it can be absurd if teachers are let loose without restraints. This is one thing that a PTA could have thrashed out."

Surprise

Mrs Arnold accused The Standard of being "sensational."

The rush of complaints on corporal punishment continued with an angry attack from a young mother near the front of the audience.

She said: "I was shocked when my son, who is only five years old, told me he was struck on the hands with a ruler by his teacher."

A denial from the headmaster of St James School for Boys, Mr Nicholas Debenham, that any form of punishment greater than a slap on the hands was ever imposed by his teachers on juniors failed to placate the mother.

Responding to the PTA suggestion, school governor Mr Bernard Saunders said: "In the light of what has happened, which has rather been more of a surprise to us than anything else, this would possibly be a very good thing."

Backing for the SES teachers

MR DAVID BODDY, currently a Press spokesman for the School of Economic Science and a parent of children at the day schools, strongly defended them.

"I have no obligation to send my children to these schools," he said, "and I know of many parents in a less fortunate position than myself and my wife who have to work exceptionally hard to be able to afford what are nevertheless modest fees to send their children to the school."

Fringe

The Rev Stephen Terry said he had two daughters at the day schools and been a member of the SES for ten years. He had left only because of pressure of work. His father-in-law is a treasurer of the SES.

Mr Terry told the meeting: "It strikes me there is nothing that can be said of the SES that cannot also be said of the Church of England. The SES has its lunatic fringe so does the Church."

"The Church has its devoted people so does the SES. It has its visionaries who perhaps are sometimes uncomfortable. So does the SES. Like all organisations it is imperfect. Like all organisations it is quite right that they should at times be taken to task for what they don't get right."

Progress

Mr Terry added that he was sure children at the schools "had remained the delightful, indestructible, imperturbable little horrors they are. There is certainly no evidence of indoctrination certainly as far as my two are concerned."

He said he had seen quite remarkable educational progress which was certainly not available in Church of England Schools.

REPORT by Peter Hounam, Andrew Hogg and Colin Adamson

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