Following the end of World War I, and throughout the 1920s, the Board of Education was involved in a number of debates that centered on the character and ideals of secondary education. These included issues around the secondary school curriculum, including the role of the board itself, the position of teachers, and the extent of gender differentiation. At the same time, the further development of secondary education became increasingly controversial, especially in the light of a pamphlet published by the Labour Party that argued in favor of extending secondary education to the whole age range. Cyril Norwood played a significant role in these policy debates, for he was by now a national figure in education. His position was consolidated even before the end of the war when he was appointed master of Marlborough College, one of the leading public boarding schools in the country. He was also invited to be a member of the new Secondary Schools Examinations Council (SSEC), which reported to the Board of Education. Norwood's influence, while it supported reform in some areas, tended to favor the maintenance of existing structures and values in the face of real and imagined threats to established traditions.

Toward the end of the war, Norwood became increasingly prominent on the national stage, and put forward his own ideas for the future of secondary education. These resonated well with the major reforms that were being developed by the president of the board of education, Herbert Fisher, who was appointed in 1916. Fisher's plans were to culminate at the end of the war in the Education Act of 1918. At this critical juncture, Norwood became established as a serious contributor to educational debate. At a high profile meeting in Oxford in August 1917, for example, Norwood took the opportunity in a speech on “Educational ideals” to present his credentials as a forward thinking reformer. He was generally sympathetic to the plans and role of the Board of Education, but he was clearly not afraid to be outspoken on some issues. He aligned his ideals explicitly with those of Plato, whose views, he declared, were “identical with the democratic ideals of the present day, i.e., universal primary and secondary education, State control, careful selection of the best talent, equality of opportunity.” He also spoke in favor of the development of part-time continuation schools that Fisher was considering as part of his plans for reform. For secondary education, it was clear that Norwood was not afraid to take a stand.
schools, Norwood suggested a broad framework for the curriculum and examinations. The curriculum should include Scripture, English, history, geography, mathematics, science, two languages, music, drawing, physical training, manual construction, and, in the case of boys, military training. Examinations would be based directly on the work of the school, with a first and a second school certificate to testify that the student had followed a course of study in an inspected school and had passed an examination. He emphasized that what he described as the “tyranny of the classics” in the curriculum should not be replaced by a similar domination by science. He also advocated that a national system should be established in which the Board of Education would be responsible for finance and inspection, while the LEAs would provide buildings and meals and attend to financial details. Teachers would be subject to public inspection, but they should have greater freedom than in the past. Finally, he called for the growth of a religious spirit through religious training.2

Such contributions made Norwood an obvious candidate for involvement in the Board of Education’s reforms. On the other hand, his tendency to speak his mind in public may well have made board officials uneasy. When considering Norwood’s potential appointment as a member of the SSEC, the response of the Board of Education officials to his potential role appeared lukewarm at best. The position arose because the newly created SSEC agreed to ask the board to provide for the inclusion of a head of a secondary school as an additional member, as well as representatives of the professions, commerce, and labor. The idea of these external representatives was turned down, but it was agreed to consider who might best fit the role of a secondary school head teacher. Accordingly, W.N. Bruce came up with a short list consisting of three names: George Smith, master of Dulwich College, C.H. Greene, headmaster of Berkhamsted Grammar School, and Cyril Norwood. Bruce described Norwood as “The Master of Marlborough College to which he went from Bristol Grammar School, which is on the grant list and where he was a great success. One of the three or four best headmasters in the country: was once in the Civil Service.” However, despite these impressive qualifications he did not favor inviting Norwood: “I fear he may be too much engrossed with his reforms at Marlborough which are said to be extensive.” Bruce argued instead in favor of Smith.3 Another official demurred, pointing out that Smith was finding difficulties at Dulwich, and proposing that a headmaster of a school on the grant list would be most appropriate for such a position; Greene, therefore, appeared to him the most appropriate choice.

It was the president of the Board of Education, faced with this advice from his officials, who came down decisively in favor of Norwood. As Fisher pointed out: “Surely we ought not to miss this chance of securing Mr. Norwood if he is available? He strikes me as being the most interesting headmaster I have yet met.”4 Norwood was indeed available, and took up the post. Four years later, in 1921, he went on to become the chairman of the SSEC, and he remained in this position for a quarter of a century until he retired in somewhat different circumstances in 1946. His role in the SSEC undoubtedly gave him the opportunity to have a continuing involvement in national policy, an involvement that exceeded that of any other educationalist outside the Board of Education during this period. Yet he remained in some respects an outsider and found it difficult to allay the doubts of officials at the board as to his influence and judgment.