

THE PROVISION AND TRAINING OF TEACHERS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: GUIDANCE FOR GOVERNING BODIES OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The purpose of this paper is to make school governors aware of the findings and recommendations of *Religious Education the Truth Unmasked*, which reports the outcomes of the recent inquiry held by the All Party Parliamentary Group for RE (APPG). The full text of the report can be found on the RE Council website: <http://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/appg/news/2013-03-18/appg-re-final-report-the-truth-unmasked>

Governors' legal responsibility for religious education (RE)

Governing bodies and headteachers in all state schools must ensure that provision is made for RE for all pupils, unless they are withdrawn by their parents. Further details, in particular guidance on the RE curriculum to be taught in different types of school, may be found in two documents on the Department for Education (DfE) website:

- 1 *Religious education in English schools: Non-statutory guidance 2010.*
<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/a0064886/religious-education-in-english-schools-non-statutory-guidance-2010>
- 2 *Religious Education (RE) in academies and free schools.*
http://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/media/file/re_and_collective_worship_in_acads_a.pdf

The importance of RE

The APPG concluded that:

Religious Education has a vital and powerful contribution to make in equipping young people, whatever their backgrounds and personal beliefs with the skills to understand and thrive in a diverse and shifting world. The ... subject is now under threat as never before, just at the moment when it is needed most.

The staffing of primary RE

Ofsted has found that pupils' achievement in RE is very inconsistent. At the time of Ofsted's most recent report on RE (Ofsted 2010)¹ primary school pupils' achievement in RE was good or outstanding in only 4 out of 10 schools. The APPG inquiry identified four key concerns related to the deployment of teachers that contributed to these disappointing standards in RE.

- a) ***The excessive use of teaching assistants to teach RE.*** Ofsted has found that class teachers use their RE lesson time for planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) more than they use other subject time. In over half of the 300 primary schools participating in the APPG inquiry, some or all pupils were taught RE by someone other than the class teacher. In 24% of schools in the inquiry RE was taught to some children by higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs), a practice almost unknown in foundation subjects such as history, geography and design and technology. The outcome is not always negative and Ofsted has reported that in the few occasions 'where the teaching assistants were very carefully supported, managed and monitored, their enthusiasm and interest in the subject could have a very positive impact on pupils' learning' (Ofsted 2010:36). BUT generally the practice is not good and reflects the low status of RE in many schools (2.2-2.5).

¹ Ofsted (2010) Transforming Religious Education

- b) **Teachers' lack of confidence.** About a half of primary teachers and trainee teachers lack confidence in teaching RE (2.6-2.10). Evidence presented to the APPG shows that the following reasons account for trainees' caution/lack of confidence with RE:
- Fear of bias (especially in those of faith)
 - Feeling of unpreparedness/ lack of experience
 - Fear about pronunciations
 - Fear of offending
 - Unsure about the RE curriculum
 - Fear of teaching controversial topics
 - Uncertainty about the place of RE in the curriculum
- c) **RE subject leaders' lack of expertise.** About a half of subject leaders who replied to the inquiry said that they lacked the expertise or experience to undertake their role effectively (2.11-2.13) Over a third of primary RE subject leaders in responding schools had no qualifications in RE above GCSE/O Level.
- d) **Insufficient teacher training in RE.** There is a wide variation in the extent of initial teacher training in RE and too many trainee teachers had little or no effective preparation for teaching the subject.(2.14-2.16)

Support for primary teachers of RE

The APPG inquiry found that in spite of many teachers' weak subject knowledge and confidence, too little in service training in RE is available (6.1-6.3). In particular:

- a) RE subject leaders responding to the APPG identified three particular CPD needs above all others:
- improving their knowledge of world religions
 - help with implementing a new agreed syllabus
 - how to assess pupils' learning
- b) The ability of SACREs to provide support for teachers of RE at a local level has been dramatically reduced by local authority funding decisions. (6.31-6.36)
- c) Primary teachers and subject leaders in schools without a religious character have particularly limited access to RE CPD (6.13-6.21)
- d) Teachers' access to RE CPD is a postcode lottery; it depends on the resources of their local SACRE or diocese, proximity to training and the priority given to RE in schools.
- e) CPD is sometimes provided by other organisations, if teachers know where to look. In particular the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) provides after-school RE support groups in some areas. In addition several websites (e.g. NATRE) and journals (e.g. RE Today) offer subject knowledge and ideas for teaching. Charitable trusts such as Culham St Gabriel's and the Farmington Institute also offer CPD opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the APPG recommendations governors should:

- require a review of RE in the school to find out
 - the extent of teachers' confidence in teaching RE, and the reasons for any lack of confidence
 - how many teachers, if any, are not teaching RE to their class and the reasons why
 - the training, expertise and enthusiasm of staff covering other teachers' RE classes
- require the school leadership to:
 - make proper provision for continuing professional development for RE subject leaders and others with responsibility for teaching RE in order to improve its quality
 - ensure that the RE subject leader knows where to find training and support locally and from national organisations
 - provide regular opportunities for RE subject leaders to train their colleagues in subject knowledge and planning and assessing RE.