

THE PROVISION AND TRAINING OF TEACHERS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: GUIDANCE FOR GOVERNING BODIES OF SECONDARY 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bodies and headteachers in all state schools must ensure that provision is made for RE for all pupils, unless they are withdrawn by their parents.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

Why does RE matter?

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.

To what extent are standards and the teaching of secondary RE a problem?

The most recent Ofsted report on RE found that pupils' achievement in RE in secondary schools shows a very mixed picture. It was good or outstanding in 40 of the 89 schools visited, requiring improvement in 45 schools and inadequate in 14 schools. The APPG inquiry identified five key concerns related to the management of teachers that contributed to these disappointing standards in over half of all secondary schools.

- a) **The excessive use of non-specialists.** The DfE has argued that pupils' attainments are affected "above all other factors" by the quality of their teachers. Ofsted has found that the lack of teachers' subject qualifications is a key factor affecting pupils' examination success. Nevertheless, nearly half of those teaching RE in secondary schools have no qualification or appropriate expertise in the subject are unlikely to have the subject knowledge to meet the DfE's national teaching standards.
- b) **The inappropriate use of non specialists.** Non specialists can be effective when they receive training and are well supported by subject specialists. The APPG identified particular weaknesses in teaching where:
 - non specialists are deployed to teach RE because they have gaps in their timetables, rather than from any interest in the subject
 - several non specialists are used to teach a few RE lessons each week, rather than one non specialist who can develop subject expertise and experience
 - different non specialists are used every year, inhibiting continuity and the development of subject expertise.

The APPG found that in such cases non specialists often lacked the confidence to move beyond the predictability of a text book or work sheet and found that other commitments made attendance at departmental meetings difficult.

- c) ***Schools misunderstanding the legal position of RE.*** Some secondary school leadership teams understood the omission of RE from the EBacc as a statement that it no longer has to be taught at Key Stage 4. This is not the case and Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education has said, 'The Government is committed to maintaining the status of RE as a compulsory subject that all pupils must study throughout their schooling'.
- d) ***Insufficient continuing professional development (CPD) in RE.*** In nearly 40% of schools RE teachers have inadequate access to continuing professional development. RE teachers in schools without a religious character have particularly limited access to CPD. RE Teachers' access to 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

What are the most urgent needs of RE heads of department and teachers of RE?

The APPG identified the following needs as priorities for heads of RE:

- a) Training in the accurate evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of all aspects of RE in the school; in particular answering the questions 'Are standards in RE high enough?' and 'Is RE teaching good enough?'
- b) Training in planning for the development of RE in the school with a focus on raising standards and improving teaching.
- c) A balance of internal and external training. External training gives RE specialists access to information about such priorities as curriculum change, new resources and local faith community contacts. Courses also provide invaluable opportunities to meet and exchange experiences with subject specialists from other schools.
- d) Subject training for ***all*** non specialist teachers of RE, focusing on the development of subject knowledge.

In response to the APPG recommendations governors should:

- a) initiate a review of RE in the school to find out
 - to what extent the school is meeting legal requirements to teach RE to all pupils, except those withdrawn by their parents
 - the subject qualifications and training of all teachers of RE (including non specialists)
 - the number of non-specialists teaching RE, the number of weekly lessons taught by each and the number of years each has been teaching RE
 - where teachers of RE find support for their teaching
 - how much subject-specific CPD RE teachers have had in the last three years
 - the proportion of Key Stage 4 and post-16 pupils entered for public examinations in RE
- b) work with the school leadership to:
 - use non-specialists to teach RE only when all other possibilities have been explored
 - identify only one or two non specialist teachers who are willing to teach RE, where the use of non-specialists is necessary
 - provide training for all non-specialists teaching RE. High quality, inexpensive subject knowledge booster courses are available on line, for example see Culham St Gabriel's (www.cstg.org.uk)
 - provide high quality RE throughout the school, assessed where possible through public examinations
 - make proper provision for continuing professional development for the RE head of department and others who teach 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. In addition to the local SACRE, the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) provides after-school RE support groups in some areas. Several websites (e.g. the RE Council, NATRE and REOnline) and journals (e.g. RE Today, REsource) offer subject knowledge and ideas for teaching. Charitable trusts such as Culham St Gabriel's and the Farmington Institute also offer CPD opportunities and bursaries for higher degrees.