

Appendix 3

MP's address
and email.

From RE professionals
constituency / area

Today's date

Dear

RE: All Party Parliamentary Group for Religious Education

Religious Education in this country is currently misunderstood, under-resourced and undervalued. There is an exciting case to be made for its inspirational potential in schools, but at the moment this argument is not being made at a national level. Certainly religious affairs make the news almost every day, but in reality RE is relevant and vital not because Christianity or multiculturalism matter primarily, but because the being and identity of our children needs time and space to develop.

We are writing to you because the Liberal Democrat MP Mr Stephen Lloyd, for Eastbourne, has agreed to Chair a new All Party Parliamentary Group for the safeguarding of RE in our schools. This is a great development. We urge you in the strongest possible terms to join and support this APPG. RE is frequently misrepresented, and public understanding of RE is often locked into negative stereotypes involving endless Bible readings. I hope the APPG will be able to radically change perception of the aims and purpose of the subject, and champion the case for its importance: RE does not exist to safeguard religion. It exists to safeguard the being and identity of our children.

In the RE classroom children and young people get the chance to engage critically with beliefs and values. They get to reflect on what kind of world they live in, what is important to them, and who they are. However, based on the press releases and news websites and articles that have quoted the APPG Chair Stephen Lloyd recently, we ask for clarification and action from you.

We wholeheartedly support the aims set out for the APPG, but have some concerns about how the meaning and purpose of RE is understood in the media and at a policy level. From the announcement on his website on Friday 17th Feb, we understand that Stephen Lloyd has three reasons for supporting RE in this way:

1. "It helps young people leave school with an accurate grasp of the importance and relevance of religion."
2. "In today's world where our children can be open to an enormous amount of misleading information, I believe it is absolutely essential they are taught about different cultures and religions by trained, experienced RE teachers.."
3. This correct information helps by "allowing children to make informed choices."

He seems to imply that the point of RE is to offer accurate information about different religions because children need to make informed choices about something which is so important.

This is an inadequate account of the vigorous, inspiring and transformative subject that we know, love and teach. But misunderstanding is widespread: In their leader article on Friday 17th, The Independent newspaper warned of “memories of old-fashioned assemblies and re-told Bible stories, with a rare nod towards other religions for older pupils.”

RE is not important because religion is important. RE is important because beliefs and values are fundamental to every single person - religious or not - and RE is about beliefs and values from non-religious as well as religious traditions. Of course the facts have to be accurate, but that is hardly justification for taking up valuable curriculum time. RE is not to be compared to a supermarket shelf displaying an array of different possible life-choices for pupils. We do not teach about diverse beliefs and values so that they may ‘choose which feel right to them’. We teach about beliefs and values because we flourish and grow as individuals when we reflect on the kind of world we live in, what is important to us, and who we are. We flourish as we are challenged to revise and deepen our account of who we are - whether or not we are atheist, agnostic, Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist.

A forceful case needs to be made for the relevance and dynamism of contemporary Religious Education. The point of RE is not choice, diversity or tolerance. These may be all very well, but what children need to enrich their life in education is time and space in the busy school day to become more themselves as they encounter others; to seek out a richer and more personal experience of their own being and existence in relation to others who may be different.

RE offers a unique space on the daily timetable for informed and meaningful reflection on matters of personal identity and the nature of reality, morality and values. RE offers the opportunity for existential deliberation to our pupils. In this the literature of agnostics, atheists and secularists will be a valuable resource alongside the Gospels, the Qur’an and the teachings of the Buddha.

We hope very much that you will consider joining and supporting the work of the APPG. We urge you to contact Stephen Lloyd and try to clarify his views on Religious Education. We would be keen to meet you to discuss these views if that were appropriate. Each of us looks forward to following and supporting the progress of the APPG, and we hope that we may see a dramatic turn-around in the fortunes of Religious Education. There is a powerful case to be made for the work we do, and at the moment it seems that no one is making it.

We look forward very much to hearing from you.

Yours,

the undersigned