

# The future of Religious Education in Birmingham Schools

## Briefing paper - the situation currently

NATRE - the National Association of RE teachers, the Religious Education council of England and Wales, Roman Catholic and Church of England education bodies are all expressing grave concern that Religious Education is being "killed off" through radical changes to the schools and examination systems.

The place of RE in academies is legally insecure with a NATRE survey indicating that statutory RE is not being provided in about a quarter of all academies. This non-compliance is predicted to increase in both academies and community secondary schools over the next year.

Funding agreements for academies are failing to make firm provision for Religious Education and so more than a quarter of non-church academies currently enter no pupils for examinations in RE.

The exclusion of RE from the English Baccalaureate is likely to make this situation worse and is actually devastating RE departments.

NATRE surveys are again reporting that some RE teachers have been sacked or moved to other duties. RE lesson time is being withdrawn and given over to history and geography.

Applications for training in secondary RE teaching has now fallen by 14% compared with a 3% rise for trainee history specialists.

The good news is that there seems to be widespread support across the country for the inclusion of RE in the EBACC, including all party backing in both Houses of Parliament. Unfortunately so far, the Secretary of State, Michael Gove has been immovable on the issue, insisting that RE is protected by its statutory status. For academies however, there is a growing view that this is simply untrue.

After much effort in the last decade to improve the profile and take up of RE as an academic subject, it is now disappointing to find that GCSE entries in RE have dropped significantly in over a third of our secondary schools.

Last year 862 schools failed to enter any pupils for the full course GCSE in Religious Studies.

## Possible impact of the Marginalisation of RE

1. Every pupil's education will be diminished in its breadth, depth and understanding of human nature and the world around them.
2. Issues such as diversity and conflict, ethics, philosophy and social change will have limited scope for exploration - a narrowed curriculum which without RE or insufficient RE inhibits skill and knowledge development of pupils.
3. Impact on religious tolerance, social cohesion and inter-faith understanding through a lack of knowledge and understanding could lead to social fragmentation/conflict.
4. Given the academies expansion programme and fewer schools teaching RE, implementing collective worship there will be an increase in the secularisation of education and learning.
5. Faith based approaches to education via voluntary aided provision, free schools and academies become the only provision where religious understanding of life informs the curriculum, however diversity is unlikely to be at the centre of RE curriculum in such schools.
6. The take up of subjects such as theology at higher education is likely to be adversely affected - impact on theology departments at universities and colleges. Overall a much narrowed view of what is worth studying prevails!

## Conclusion

Religious Education is at a crossroads! Without it, pupils of different faiths and non, have little opportunity to share their understanding of the world and to learn from one another via systematic discussion, reflection and quality teaching and learning where religious pluralism is concerned.

Given the current Government approach, with the possibility of all schools eventually becoming academies, the future of RE as an academic subject looks particularly bleak. The future of a broad and balanced curriculum as an entitlement for all pupils is consequently compromised.

However, the good news is Religious Education in Birmingham has an innovative and ground-breaking Agreed Syllabus which does have the celebration of diversity and the learning from faith and about faiths at its very heart. The Local Authority in Birmingham and the Diocese of Birmingham are still strongly committed to promoting Religious Education as a key area of study in the learning experiences on offer to all Birmingham children and young people. If we are to ensure a cohesive society in which citizens all can flourish, RE and collective worship must remain central to the school experience for all pupils.

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