

# News release

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## **Overall improvement in achievement and standards in religious education**

*But report finds the current statutory arrangements for RE makes it difficult to meet the needs of pupils.*

Religious education (RE) has improved overall in the past few years but there are still wide variations in the quality of provision, and achievement by pupils remains very inconsistent, according to a new report published today by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted).

The report, ***Making sense of religion: a report on religious education in schools and the impact of locally agreed syllabi***, calls for a review of the current statutory position of RE. It questions whether the subject in non-faith maintained schools is best served by the current arrangements. At present RE is placed outside the National Curriculum with all 151 local authorities having responsibility for developing their own locally agreed syllabus.

The publication by the government in 2004 of a non-statutory National Framework for RE was designed to promote greater consistency of provision and raise standards in RE. However, inspectors found that its impact is diminished by the current statutory arrangements. The existing structures do not ensure there is sufficient consistency in the quality of RE across the country. Accordingly, the subject cannot respond quickly enough to important national initiatives such as the emphasis on a more flexible curriculum and the drive to promote community cohesion.

Pupils' achievement in RE in primary schools has improved over the period 2001 to 2006 but achievement at Key Stage 3 is very inconsistent. Almost all provision and achievement in primary schools is at least satisfactory but the proportion which is good or better is not high enough. However, in secondary schools, achievement was inadequate in around one in eight schools visited and was good or better in only one in four schools. While there is much good teaching in RE in both primary and secondary schools the impact of this teaching, particularly in secondary schools, is not always translated into high achievement over time because of weaknesses in the structure of the curriculum for RE.

There continues to be an impressive rise in the number of pupils leaving school with a qualification in RE and there has been a significant improvement in full-course GCSE and A-level results over the past five years. However short course GCSE results have remained

static, with around half of the pupils entered achieving the higher A\*-C grades. This is because too much of the teaching is unchallenging. Inspectors found that teaching methods tend to encourage pupils to adopt standard, mechanistic responses to the issues they study. They learn to pass the examination, but learning is in danger of trivialising issues of global human significance rather than developing a deeper understanding of religious perspectives on life.

The report finds that RE often makes a positive contribution to the development of pupils' understanding of diversity and to the promotion of community cohesion. However the curriculum and teaching in RE, particularly in secondary schools, do not place sufficient emphasis on exploring the changing political and social significance of religion in the modern world. As a result, the full potential of the subject to contribute to community cohesion, education for diversity and citizenship is not being realised.

Miriam Rosen, Director of Education, said:

"Recent world events, the rise of more fundamentalist forms of religion, the growth of faith schools and the debate about the relationship between religion and British identity have given a new impetus and urgency to RE.

"The improvements in RE over the last few years are to be welcomed but more needs to be done if the subject is to develop in students a more profound understanding of the significance of religious commitment and diversity and its impact on society."

The report argues that RE should not ignore controversy or the changes in the role and significance of religion in the modern world. Pupils should be taught that religion is complex, that its impact is ambiguous and should be given the opportunity to explore that ambiguity. Inspectors concluded that RE needs to embrace the study of religion and society but that, at present, it was unusual to find topics which deal with religion's role in society, changing patterns in religion in the local, national and global community, or the changing nature of religious belief and practice. The current focus in RE on ethical or philosophical issues needs to be complemented by consideration of questions about the social role of religion.

A major finding of the report is that there are significant weaknesses in curriculum planning for RE and in the way the subject is assessed particularly in secondary schools. Planning and assessment do not ensure that pupils' understanding is developed progressively. The report recommends that GCSE courses are improved to ensure they build more effectively on pupils' prior learning. Most significantly, the report urges action to ensure the Key Stage 3 curriculum is more coherent and progressive. Serious weaknesses in the way levels of attainment are used in planning and assessment remain widespread.

**Leadership and management of RE have improved.** The recent emphasis on using self evaluation to improve the quality and impact of subject leadership has paid good dividends in RE in both primary and secondary schools. The impact of the national strategies on the quality of teaching in RE in primary schools has been particularly positive. However, aspects

of teaching, assessment and curriculum are unsatisfactory in a large minority of secondary schools.

The report finds that Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) provide valuable support for RE when they are led and resourced properly. The report recommends that consideration should be given to extending the role of SACREs to reflect the priorities of promoting community cohesion and educating for diversity. However, many local authorities do not have sufficient resources to ensure SACREs fulfil their responsibilities effectively. For this reason, the recent submission to the DfES of the Religious Education Council for England and Wales proposals for a national strategy for RE is to be welcomed.

- Ends -

## NOTES TO EDITORS

1. ***Making sense of religion: a report on religious education in schools and the impact of locally agreed syllabi*** can be found on the Ofsted website at [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)
2. This report draws on evidence about RE from whole-school inspections over the period 2001 to 2006. It also draws on the programme of subject visits by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) over the period 2003 to 2006. In 2006, these visits focused specifically on eight local authorities that had recently adopted a revised agreed syllabus.
3. Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) are responsible for advising local authorities on RE and collective worship. Each SACRE in England comprises four representative groups: Christian and other religious denominations, the Church of England, teachers' associations and elected councillors.
4. On 1 April 2007 a new single inspectorate for children and learners was created. It has responsibility for the inspection of adult learning and training – work formerly undertaken by the Adult Learning Inspectorate; the regulation and inspection of children's social care – work formerly undertaken by the Commission for Social Care Inspection; the inspection of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service – work formerly undertaken by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration; and the former regulatory and inspection activities of Ofsted.