

MPs warned of decline in specialist RE teachers

MPs and Peers have been warned that the rising numbers of children taught Religious Education (RE) by teachers that have no RE qualification themselves could damage the subject. While state-educated pupils are being given greater access to mathematics, science and foreign language subject specialists, this is at the expense of other subjects, including RE.

The panel of MPs was hearing evidence at a new inquiry organised by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Religious Education on the supply of, and support for, teachers of RE. They were given a new perspective on the Department for Education's Workforce data, confirming much RE in state-funded secondary schools is taught by non-specialists:

- In 2011 the number of teachers with no relevant post-A level qualification in RE was 55%, twice as many as those who taught history for example (27%).

Experts also explained to MPs how non-specialists teaching a specialist subject often correlates with poorer GCSE results as well as a more limited experience of the subject for students. Examples were given of the results of an inner city academy where students had been taught RE GCSE by non-specialists, with no subject leader holding a qualification in the subject. On average 46% of students gained an A or A* across their subjects, yet only 11% of these grades were awarded in RE.

The shortage in specialist provision is also due to a steep drop in teacher training colleges offering state-funded training places for prospective RE teachers. Teacher Training Agency figures show a fall in the allocation of initial PGCE teacher training places for RE in England:

- There were 675 places in 2010-11 in England
- In 2011-12 places dropped to 460, in 2012-13 they dropped to 310, and for 2013/14 the figure will be 321
- There has been a drop of more than 50% from 2010 to 2013/2014.

Detailed evidence was presented by Deborah Weston, National Association of RE Teachers; Mike Castelli, University Lecturers in RE; Dr Mark Chater, Culham St Gabriels; Audrey Brown, the Department for Education; Lesley Prior from the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils for RE; and John Keast from the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. Panellists included Stephen Lloyd MP, and Dan Rogerson MP.

Stephen Lloyd MP, chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education, said:

“This inquiry is starting to shed light on some serious shortcomings of our education system in embracing in-depth subject knowledge and understanding. We are seeing some telling data which indicates that a lot of RE is being taught by non-specialists, and furthermore the specialists are not there in the schools to deliver the high quality of RE that is needed.”

Despite a strong initial response, the panel would still like to hear from teachers with current experience of RE in both primary and secondary schools as well as from agencies, experts, and faith and belief organisations who work in this area.

Lloyd concludes: “In our first call for evidence session we have started to piece together hard facts which will allow us to go back to the Secretary of State with a robust report that shows what is really happening to RE at a grass roots level.”

The deadline for receiving written information is 14th December 2012. A second oral evidence session will be held at the House of Commons on 16th January 2013 between 5pm and 7pm and will also consider RE at primary level. Please email Dr. Barbara Wintersgill (b.wintersgill@btinternet.com) for further information or visit www.religiouseducationcouncil.org. A report will be published in early 2013.

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1. Established in 1973, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) brings together over 60 national organisations. These comprise academic and professional associations specialising in religions and religious education, as well as individual religion and belief organisations inclusive of the range of faith communities found nationally, including the British Humanist Association. The REC's shared priority is to strengthen the quality of provision for the subject throughout the educational system. It provides the secretariat for the All Party Parliamentary Group on RE.
2. The REC is a national organisation that represents a range of faiths and beliefs. Members include the Church of England, the Catholic Church, the Free Churches, the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Zoroastrian and Bahá'í faiths, and the British Humanist Association and professional teaching associations.
3. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education is chaired by Eastbourne and Willingdon MP Stephen Lloyd, with its secretariat provided by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC). Vice chairs are Fiona Bruce MP, Mary Glendon MP, Baroness Brinton and Mike Crockart MP.