

**Public consultation on curriculum reform: updated non-statutory
guidance on religious education**

Response from ATL, the education union

24 July 2009

ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through social partnership.

ATL policy

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in promoting social justice. Within light national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders, and assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively across a local area to provide excellent teaching and learning opportunities and a broad and balanced curriculum, and to support pupils' well-being. There must be a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

Introduction

This QCDA/DCSF consultation focuses on the clarity of the revised *Guidance on religious education*. However, there are broader issues to be addressed, which include the curriculum subject status of RE, contradictory government policy and guidance messages and the impact of the current school system on children and young people's experience of religious education.

ATL has developed a policy on faith schools which is based on member and research evidence, with the values of community cohesion and pupil well-being at its heart. Therein, we also address the RE curriculum within state faith schools and the curricular freedoms afforded to them, above and beyond those given to non-faith state schools. Our response will reflect our concerns about the impact of these freedoms on pupil entitlement, the latter a key principle of ATL's curriculum policy, *Subject to Change*.

ATL's response on the Guidance will mainly address content, although we begin with two specific points on style.

Document Style

Need for cross-referencing

The document is quite comprehensive, but not always easy to use. Although the chapter titles are reasonably clear, much of the content builds on facts provided earlier in the document but very little sign-posting is given to that prior information. As this is a guidance document intended to be a useful reference document for schools, local authorities, Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) and other interested groups, with differing degrees of knowledge and experience in the provision of religious education in state schools, it would be very helpful if the document contained informative cross-references.

Case studies

The document provides some interesting case studies which we believe to be very helpful. However, their value would be greatly increased if they were referenced to an appendix, where further details could be provided. At the moment, should schools or local authorities find a particular model in a case study to be of interest and wish to explore them further, they have no easy avenue of enquiry. By providing some further references, the Department can develop these case studies into very use-able and useful resources to schools.

Document Content

Level of detail

ATL appreciates the comprehensiveness of the *Guidance* but we are concerned that there is a worrying lack of detail in some sections, particularly where users may have less knowledge of the area. For example, the section on SACREs and Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs), is limited in its usefulness because of a paucity of information about the relationship between the two groups. ATL members would find it helpful to know more about the boundary delineation between SACREs and ASCs and whether there is any overlap of individual members. It would also be useful to know more about the quotas of membership for these bodies; for example group A of an ASC is to be comprised of members of Christian denominations and other religions and religious denominations, it would be useful to know if there are any quotas in the breakdown of these subgroups.

The Legal Framework section also suffers from a lack of detail, which compromises its clarity, particularly unfortunate when one considers the area of coverage. For example, ATL members felt that the inspection of denominational RE in foundation and voluntary schools with a religious character gives little indication of the arrangements for such inspection nor does it signpost further relevant guidance on the matter. Despite a recognition that this inspection system is inconsistent with that which applies to non-faith schools, there is no information about where these denominational inspectors should come from nor the criteria by which they must inspect. Overall, the information on inspection of RE in state schools is incomplete, with a brief mention of Ofsted and a footnote which recognises the separate arrangements for voluntary aided faith schools. However, the footnote itself [51., p40] is misleading as it talks of "additional" inspections of denominational RE in voluntary aided schools. As the content of denominational RE in such schools is not inspected by Ofsted perhaps these would be better termed 'separate inspections'.

The paragraph on RE in academies is similarly lacking in detail. It is clear in stating that the "the precise requirements governing the nature and content of the RE curriculum is specified by the funding arrangement that exists between

the DCSF and the individual academy". However, it does not give any indication of the kinds of agreement that have developed nor any minimum requirements beyond inclusion in the curriculum. When the document contains many case-studies throughout, it is a glaring omission and limits the authority and helpfulness of this document.

This revision of RE guidance offers the opportunity to provide a guidance document which is truly comprehensive and which can serve as the first port of call for any query around RE provision in the state sector. However, it will not be able to do that without further detail and/or signposting to other relevant documentation.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

We welcome the recommendation that those who teach RE should be suitably qualified and trained in the subject and that they have regular opportunities for high-quality CPD. Furthermore, we are satisfied that the *Guidance* recognises the current reality that many non-specialist RE teachers do and will continue to teach RE at secondary level. However, the document does not address how the journey from this latter situation to one where the RE workforce is fully qualified / trained can best be made. We welcome the reference to the TDA (7.5.5.2) and its training packages although again the document suffers from no cross referencing. However, these are existing training programmes and packages which do not seem to be able to meet the shortfall in the qualifications and training of many of those involved in teaching RE. This issue strongly relates to the status of RE as a non-National Curriculum subject.

Consistency

The *Guidance* is very clear on the importance of RE to the education of children and young people. It is also strong on the need for it to be taught in an "objective and pluralistic" manner. Yet there are inconsistencies within the document itself which undermine this otherwise clear, and important, message. Some of these inconsistencies are due to differences between the message and the education contexts in which RE must operate, others come from the document itself and can be more easily addressed. Therefore, we will deal with the latter case first.

The language within the document is not always consistent. For example, we welcome the inclusion of the word 'belief', in addition to 'religion' within the document. However, this inclusivity is not consistent throughout the document; the word 'belief' is not mentioned at all in the RE Post 14 section yet it is included under the *Qualifications* chapter. We welcome the reference to non-religious beliefs and non-religious groups (section 3). However, these references do not carry on throughout the document and this patchy coverage undermines the inclusivity of the document, leaving the impression that government is ambivalent about whether to specify 'religious or a broader 'faith and belief' education.

There is also some substantial confusion in Section 3 of the *Guidance* regarding RE curriculum content. We are treated to highlighted sections (in boxes) on what is spiritual, moral, social and cultural development followed by links with RE. This seems to suggest that all these areas will be covered within RE, with little acknowledgement of the importance of other subjects in doing this. A striking example of this is on page 13, with the box that talks about the study of issues such as "crime and punishment, sex and relationships, addiction and

dependency, or diet and body image” and then links to RE, without any acknowledgement of the place of PSHEE in the coverage of these issues. The text mentions some overlap between PSHEE and RE yet the device of highlighted boxes and a lack of clarity regarding the relevant subject boundaries and cross-curricular links are misleading about the proper content of the RE curriculum.

Broader educational context of RE

More fundamentally, however, there is a dissonance between the overall message of the *Guidance* and the broader educational contexts in which it operates.

We strongly welcome the emphasis within the document on inclusivity, on “objective and pluralistic” teaching and on a “broad, balanced and rich” RE curriculum. However, this does not always sit comfortably with the information that the facts that non-religious belief groups do not have an automatic right to sit on local SACREs and ASCs and when they do are not afforded the same voting rights; there is an acknowledgement in one of the case studies that the presence of individuals representing Baha’i, humanist and university groups, for example, would cause an issue in the case of individual votes but their contribution to group votes is acceptable. Despite the overall inclusive message, this reality shows that some group members have less inherent right of participation within the SACREs.

The Guidance makes it clear that RE should not be taught as “indoctrination into a particular faith or belief”, a message which we welcome. However, the Guidance also includes the information that in voluntary aided schools with a religious character, “RE should be provided in accordance with the provisions of the trust deed relating to the school or, where there is no provision in the trust deed, with the religion or denomination mentioned in the order designating the school as having a religious character.” This is compounded by the fact that the content of such denominational RE in these schools is not inspected by the state inspection body, Ofsted, but by separate denominational inspectors appointed by the school governing body. The contrast between the non-indoctrination message and the reality of RE curriculum exemptions for state-maintained faith schools causes a dissonance which is a feature of the Guidance document.

Indeed, this inconsistency in accountability undermines the community cohesion message which is focused on pupils learning about and alongside each other, in terms of cultures, values and beliefs. Yet again, the Guidance bumps up against the legislative reality which promotes the teaching of denominational RE, separate and selective admissions and employment policies for voluntary aided schools of a religious nature.

RE’s curriculum status

Many of the inconsistencies noted in this document and in broader government policy in this area would be resolved with the inclusion of RE into the National Curriculum. We would like to see the development of the current non-statutory National Framework into a light-touch national curriculum. Such a curriculum could build on the current QCDA illustrative programmes of study allowing ASCs and schools the freedom to “interpret those programmes of study in the light of local circumstances”. Indeed, our vision is not far from the Guidance’s recommendation, both arising from a desire to “ensure a consistent entitlement to breadth and richness in RE for all pupils, and adherence to a coherent set of national standards.” At the moment, that consistency cannot be assured as RE is

not a national curriculum subject. This lack of consistency is also problematic for pupils in transition between schools or regions.

Making RE a national curriculum subject would help move it from its earlier identity of religious instruction towards the broader religious education which would “reflect the current diversity of religions and beliefs in Britain and the modern world.” The Guidance message of the significance of RE in promoting community cohesion, personal growth and well-being underlines its importance as an entitlement for every child and young person. However, the only way to ensure that entitlement for every pupil is to make RE a national curriculum subject.

The status of RE as a national curriculum subject and its teaching as a broad and diverse subject would also beg questions of the current parental right of withdrawal. Should the subject be taught and experienced as outlined within the Guidance aims, it will be inclusive and diverse, including a range of religious and non-religious beliefs, promoting knowledge and understanding of others in our diverse society. ATL’s policy seeks for greater community cohesion and a need for all pupils to have opportunities to develop understanding of the religions and beliefs of others. We believe the current rights of parents to ask for “alternative RE to be provided in accordance with the tenets of a particular religion or denomination” challenges these aims of cohesion and shared understandings. ATL is also concerned that the parental right to withdraw underlines RE’s status as a non-NC subject, and undermines any parity of esteem with national curriculum subjects which do not make such provision.

Conclusion

ATL welcomes this revised *Guidance*. There is much within it that fits with our own policy aims, which are child-, staff-, community- and education-focused. We welcome the emphasis within the document on inclusion and on community cohesion. We find many of the case studies useful. The question sections within each chapter which address relevant groups such as headteachers and governors are thought-provoking and add value to the document, particularly the section on parental withdrawal. The list of resources at the end is also very welcome. As stated earlier, the document would benefit from better signposting between sections to make best use of the good material it contains.

However, the Guidance suffers from a lack of consistency which is reflected in its language, and discord between its inclusive message and the current legislative framework around RE. Within this document, it is important that the language is made as consistently inclusive as possible. ATL also urges a review of the arrangements around RE, its curriculum status and exemptions that affects its content, and inspection within voluntary aided schools of a religious nature. We know that it is vital that our young people learn about the richness of our diverse culture, in order that our communities are cohesive and thriving environments for them and future generations.