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Office for  
Standards  
in Education



## **Religious education in primary schools**

### **Ofsted subject reports series 2001/02**

**E-publication**

**November 2002**

**HMI 797**

**Minutes of the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education  
13 March 2003**

**AGREED:**

That Members submit their comments in writing to the Clerk as a response to the paper produced by the Consultant and in preparation for a possible inspection of the SACRE.

**7. REASE PROJECT UPDATE:**

SACRE noted that some good work was being done with Northumberland Park School on working with feeder schools effectively a transfer project to smooth the transition from primary to secondary. A bridging unit was being developed in partnership with Brunel University and with input from the consultant would also link with the excellence in cities initiative. There would also be opportunities for some joint working with Lewisham.

**8. RE QUESTIONNAIRE FEEDBACK:**

SACRE noted there had been a limited response particularly from faith schools. Feedback which had been picked up focussed on a wish to forge closer links with RE departments in other schools. SACRE were keen to assist schools in networking and sharing best practice.

**9. DIRECTORY OF PLACES OF WORSHIP**

As the return of forms remained disappointing it was agreed to consider alternative means of collating the information.

**10. MONITORING STANDARDS - OFSTED REPORTS:**

SACRE considered the commentary produced by the Consultant on the OFSTED inspection reports of Coleraine Park Primary, Rokesley Infant, Rhodes Avenue Primary, White Hart Lane Secondary and Blanche Neville Special School. Having considered the reports SACRE agreed that good practice should be shared.

**11. INFORMATION EXCHANGE:**

SACRE received the latest NASACRE newsletter and notification of its AGM.

EDDIE GRIFFITH  
Chair

**Minutes of the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education  
13 March 2003**

**4. MEMBERSHIP:**

**AGREED:**

To confirm the appointment of Mrs Huntley of the Methodist Church to Group A Christian Denominations and Other Faiths Group.

**5. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY:**

Leon Joseph gave SACRE a full appraisal of the events which had taken place to mark the Holocaust. The launch of the Anne Frank Exhibition had been particularly well attended and had been opened by Doreen Lawrence OBE. The support of the Education Directorate had been vital and they had made a substantial financial contribution which helped ensure the success of the event. Local school children had been involved in the launch including two girls from Hornsey who had read extracts from Anne Frank's diary which proved very moving for all those present.

There had been a fantastic response from volunteers with every session of the exhibition being opened being fully staffed.

The commemorative event had again involved three strands, commemoration, community and education. As part of the council's commitment to the development of the garden of remembrance a new wrought iron arch had been unveiled at the event. Local school children from St Francis de Sales, Risely and Bruce Grove had planted snowdrops in the garden which had flowered around Holocaust Remembrance Day and been symbolic of new beginnings/life etc. Both the Haringey Youth Choir and the Youth Orchestra had performed at the event and been most impressive.

Discussion turned to the prospect of war in Iraq and the possibility of an upsurge in anti-Islamic incidents and that schools should remain vigilant.

**AGREED:**

That the report be noted.

**6. INSPECTION OF SACREs:**

SACRE noted that since their last meeting a letter had now been received from Ofsted confirming that inspections of SACREs were to be introduced to measure their effectiveness.

Haringey had volunteered its SACRE for an inspection in recognition of the achievements of recent years and the good working relationship with the Local Education Authority. Whilst it was unlikely that Haringey SACRE would be selected for an inspection as the LEA was due to be inspected in the Autumn it would be wise to do some preparatory work for an inspection of SACRE. The consultant had circulated some initial thoughts about the process and questions that could be considered and a supplementary paper was circulated at the meeting. In view of the complexity of some of the issues to be considered members requested that they submit their comments in writing to the Clerk. The Clerk undertook to circulate copies of the Annual report and the QCA booklet " An effective SACRE - making a difference" to all members as these would be of use.

AGENDA ITEM 2

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION - 13 MARCH 2003**

**Group A:** Christian Denominations and other Faiths represented in Haringey:

Mr B. Haylock (Salvation Army FCFC), \*Ms S. Berkery-Smith (Diocese of Westminster (RC)), Mr M. Usamah (Muslim Educational Trust), Mrs A. Kennard (Board of Deputies of British Jews), \*Mr M. Ibrahim (Muslim Educational Trust), \*Ms O. Thoma (Greek Orthodox), \*Ms B. Parsons (Spiritual Assembly of the Bahai's), Dharmachari Kulamitra (North London Buddhist Centre) Mr K. Ranganathan (Hindu (Shiva) Temple Trust) and Miss A. Campbell (United Reformed Church).

**Group B:** Church of England:

\*Mr E. Griffith, Mrs J. Jamieson, Ms C. Goymer, Mr J. Seabrook and Mr A Johnston.

**Group C:** Professional Associations:

Ms N. Parmar (NUT), David Ferguson (NUT), Mr C. Cahill (SHA), \*Mr N. Bradley (HTA) Ms J. Arrowsmith (NUT) and two vacancies

**Group D:** Local Education Authority Group:

\*Councillor Bloch, \*Councillor Haley, Mr J. Baaden, \*Mr B. Oakley and one vacancy

Co-opted Non-Voting Member:

\*Mr N. Bacrac (British Humanist Association)

\*Members present

Also Present: Denise Chaplin (R.E. Consultant), Jenny Stonhold (LEA Education Effectiveness) and Nick Evans (Clerk to SACRE).

**1. APPOINTMENT OF DEPUTY CHAIR:**

**AGREED:**

That the Councillor Haley be appointed Deputy Chair for the remainder of the current Municipal Year.

**2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:**

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Mrs Kennard, Ms Goymer, Mr Haylock, Mr Seabrook, Mrs Huntley, Mr Cahill, Mr Ferguson, Ms Arrowsmith and Mr Usamah.

**3. MINUTES:**

**AGREED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 December 2002 be confirmed.

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## Main findings

- There have been significant improvements in religious education (RE) in over one in three schools since their last inspection. Around one in eight have failed to improve.
- Achievement is satisfactory in the large majority of schools. It is good overall in over one in three schools in both Key Stages 1 and 2.
- Over half of RE lessons are well taught. Characteristics of weak teaching include low expectations and undemanding tasks. In some schools insufficient use is made of RE to promote inclusion.
- Nearly all schools meet legal requirements in providing RE for all registered pupils in accordance with an agreed syllabus. Most schools have maintained a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum in RE.
- Many schools use the DfES/QCA schemes of work as a model for their own schemes or to complement their agreed syllabus. This practice usually has a positive effect without marginalising the agreed syllabus requirements.
- Assessment remains a key weakness. The procedures for assessing pupils' attainment and progress are unsatisfactory or poor in about one third of schools.
- The use of new technology is weaker in RE than almost any other subject, being unsatisfactory in three in ten schools.

## Religious education overview and trends, 2001-2002

Religious education has **improved** in schools where the subject leader, supported by the school management, has implemented effectively the action plan resulting from the previous inspection. Better subject leadership, schemes of work, planning and teaching have also contributed significantly to improvements. The improvements in RE over the last six years have been maintained; and in all aspects except assessment and the use of ICT, RE now compares well with the National Curriculum foundation subjects.

In schools where **achievement in RE** is high, pupils at the end of Key Stage 1 are aware that religious texts have a special status for believers and recall orally or in writing popular stories from religions. By the end of Key Stage 2 pupils have a good knowledge and understanding of the key events in the life of Jesus and others, such as Muhammad, and their importance to believers. Similarly, young pupils' knowledge of the facts of key celebrations and places of worship develops by the end of Year 6 into a more sophisticated understanding of how events and places express key beliefs. For example, older pupils know about Jewish religious practices in the home and how they relate to the history of that people and can explain the meaning and significance of the various elements in the Jewish Passover meal. Key Stage 1 pupils recognise artefacts and know what religions they are connected with. Older

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pupils understand symbolism in its wider forms, such as language, art and actions such as the Peace at the Eucharist or *wudu* for Muslims. They understand why symbolism is so often central to religious practice, such as candles in worship and trees in Tu B'Shvat.

Pupils' progress in RE from Year 1 to Year 6 is increasingly apparent, as in the following school.

*Key Stage 1 pupils know that many people belong to a religion; one Year 2 class used their information technology skills to produce graphs showing the range of religions in their class. But understanding of the concept of 'belief' does not generally develop until Key Stage 2, where pupils understand, for instance, the Hindu belief that God exists everywhere, in many forms, and is too great to be fully understood. Even very young children understand that Jesus used his parables to make a point and they can make simple links between the stories and the reasons why he told them. This early awareness of the importance of religious teaching is the foundation for more sophisticated understanding at the end of Key Stage 2. For example, one Year 6 class discussed the meaning of the Hadith. By the end of the lesson pupils had the confidence to write about and explain their own traditions.*

There has been a significant improvement in pupils' learning **from** religion. Four to seven year-olds discuss their ideas and feelings in relation to what they have learnt, for example what makes them feel vulnerable or happy. They learn messages from stories and teachings, such as the importance of belonging, following agreed rules and developing caring attitudes. In the best cases, older pupils develop sensitivity to the different faiths they encounter and their learning from the religions they study plays a large part in their spiritual development, while the studies they make of religious practices broaden their cultural development significantly. Pupils' reflections on their learning are expressed through a range of media. For example, in one school: 'Writing poems such as "No more" about events on 11 September gave older pupils opportunities to reflect, develop spiritually, and show their deeper feelings.'

**Teaching** is good in over four schools in ten. In these schools, teachers generally have good subject knowledge gained through research in planning for their lessons. They inspire pupils' interest and curiosity by making their lessons lively, challenging, interesting and relevant. Teaching is often enhanced by visits to neighbouring places of worship and by lessons and demonstrations from visitors from faith communities. Where RE is well taught, teachers achieve an appropriate balance between teaching about religions and using skilful questions to help pupils to think deeply, in order to understand how the teachings of religions might be relevant to them in their daily lives. Teachers' good management of the pupils and of the lessons ensures that they can involve all of the class in discussions and deal with delicate issues, such as beliefs and values, with sensitivity and openness. Consequently, RE continues to make a major contribution to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Although assessment remains weaker in RE than in other subjects, some teachers have developed very good practice. For example, they assess pupils' achievements in relation to different strands of the attainment targets and have systematic but manageable ways of recording them.

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Satisfactory lessons have some of these features, but fall down in other respects, such as the level of challenge in reading materials or tasks. The small number of unsatisfactory lessons is characterised by significant weaknesses in teachers' subject knowledge and their lack of enthusiasm for the subject. In some cases teachers are unable to build on pupils' prior knowledge because of particular weaknesses in one year's provision.

The National Literacy Strategy has contributed to the improvement in teachers' planning and the strong literary basis of RE has raised teachers' awareness of the variety and quality of work they can expect from pupils. Generally, they have higher expectations than before of pupils' ability to read and interpret texts and to make connections in their learning, for example, relating what they are reading in literacy to what they have discussed in religious education. At best they expect more of pupils' speaking and listening in RE, encouraging them to ask questions, retell stories and participate in role-play and 'hot-seating'. Unusually, pupils in one Year 6 class memorised the key events in the New Testament using a series of rhyming strategies. Pupils frequently produce extensive written work in RE, using a range of styles such as reports, poetry, letters, posters and play writing. In some schools the RE curriculum provides material for literacy hours.

The **Ofsted subject report for 2000/01** raised important issues which some schools should continue to address, including:

- developing a coherent RE curriculum
- resolving tensions between range and depth.

## **Issue in religious education 2001/02**

### **Inclusion**

The aims, curriculum, resources and pedagogy of RE embrace the values at the heart of inclusion, notably respect for all. The teaching of religions in itself does not promote respect, but when teaching exemplifies openness and sensitivity to differences in beliefs and practices then RE plays a part in creating an open and accepting atmosphere in the school.

In one school, for example:

*Teachers devise an imaginative range of methods to include pupils of all faiths and cultures in RE lessons, whether or not their faith is the focus of teaching at the time. In one school, for example, pupils observing religious festivals are asked to talk to their classes so that there is a sharing of information about cultural differences, values and beliefs. This reflects the expectation, strongly promoted throughout the school, that pupils should be tolerant and respectful of others.*

In one lesson:



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*A Muslim visitor to a Year 2 class talked about Ramadan and Eid, introducing pupils to new vocabulary and cultural traditions. The pupils were very attentive while the visitor spoke and showed great interest in the presentation. Two Muslim pupils said a prayer in Arabic, to which all pupils listened attentively and respectfully. Other Muslim pupils were invited to talk about special family activities during Eid. A Muslim parent sent a selection of Muslim celebratory food for the pupils to share.*

In teaching pupils to learn from religion, teachers encourage them to recognise the diversity of faith and culture in British society, to respect the right of people to be different and to see through outward differences to the person beneath. Through well-managed discussion, pupils enjoy the opportunities to discuss and share their ideas, beliefs and traditions. However, this has to be planned carefully. The wrong choice of visual material or the misuse of artefacts can arouse pupils' mirth rather than interest and disdain rather than respect.

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## **Religious education in secondary schools**

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## Main findings

- Provision for religious education (RE) has improved significantly in one third of schools since their last inspection, but progress has been unsatisfactory in one fifth.
- An appropriate statutory curriculum is still not in place in about a third of schools.
- Religious education continues to be a very successful subject at Key Stage 4. In 2001, over 275,000 pupils, over half of all those entered for GCSE examinations, gained a GCSE in religious education, of whom two thirds entered for the short course. Fifty-seven per cent of all pupils gained a grade A\*–C in the full course compared to 50.3 per cent for the short course. Girls continue to outperform boys.
- Teaching is good or very good in nearly six schools in ten. There has been an improvement in teachers' expectations, particularly at Key Stage 3. However, assessment remains weaker in religious education than in most other subjects. The procedures for assessing pupils' attainment and progress are unsatisfactory in nearly three in ten schools.
- Religious education continues to make a very significant contribution to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. It makes a significant contribution to inter-faith and inter-cultural understanding.
- The leadership and management of religious education departments are unsatisfactory in two in ten schools, and remain weaker than for most other subjects. However, some aspects of leadership have improved since the last inspection, notably the monitoring and evaluation of religious education teaching and in the strategic use of resources.
- ICT is not used effectively in religious education in two schools in five. The use of ICT remains weaker in religious education than in any other subject.

## Religious education overview and trends, 2000-2001

Pupils generally have at least a sound knowledge and understanding of the richness and diversity of religion, and of the place of Christianity and other principal religions in the country and their distinctive features. There is encouraging evidence of a shift in the focus of pupils' knowledge from the outward phenomena of religions, which are the essentials of the primary curriculum, to an understanding of more challenging religious beliefs and teachings and how they shape adherents' lives. Key Stage 3 pupils make better progress than in the past in these respects. It is not uncommon for them to advance, for example, from relatively simple descriptive and explanatory skills at age 11, to being able at age 14 to grasp and evaluate the highly abstract arguments of Aquinas, Ludwig Feuerbach and William Paley on the existence of God. Pupils' understanding of religious practices has become more sophisticated; for

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example, in one lesson they were able to explain in depth the Jewish background to the Christian festival of Pentecost and to draw further conclusions about the historical relationship between these two religions. It is becoming more common for Key Stage 3 pupils to use basic skills of textual criticism to understand theories of the formation of the Gospels. Moreover, instead of writing simple accounts of the lives of 'exemplars of the faith', as was common practice, they now learn about the influence of religious beliefs on people's lives and motivation, such as opposition to Hitler within the German Confessing Church.

As a result of teachers' increasing attention to Attainment Target 2 (AT2), pupils' ability to learn from religion is improving. They draw comparisons between what they have learnt and their beliefs and experiences, particularly in relation to issues of identity, meaning, purpose, values and commitments. As they get older they learn to balance objective argument with personal beliefs and feelings, recognising that what may seem self-evident to them may be questionable to someone of another culture. Popular examples of this are abortion, euthanasia, the role and status of women in different societies and the application of Aquinas' idea of the 'Just War' to contemporary situations, such as the war in Afghanistan. Pupils with less well-developed knowledge and skills are nevertheless able to respond to questions of meaning and purpose in a positive and sensitive way, albeit often at a superficial and subjective level. This was illustrated in a Year 9 class where a discussion on the problem of suffering in the world was limited by pupils' lack of knowledge of religious and other perspectives on the subject.

In spite of recent improvements, pupils' achievements are seriously depressed in one in four schools. In these cases pupils have difficulty in describing accurately the main features of different faiths and understanding how religious faith can affect the lives of believers. They have little knowledge of religions and have poor analytical and evaluative skills, as a result of being given mechanistic and undemanding activities.

Pupils' ability to develop and deploy their literacy skills in RE is improving. There is generally a very strong emphasis throughout the RE curriculum on the development of literacy skills and this provides a considerable boost to pupils' progress. For example, in one school:

*A variety of prose and poetry is used and pupils are required to write in different styles and for different purposes. Writing frames are provided which ensure that all are able to make progress. Spelling and punctuation are corrected in the marking of work. Pupils are encouraged to read aloud, and books from the school and County libraries are used to supplement the departmental resources. During Year 9, students also develop their extended writing skills in more depth; for example, Year 9 students had produced some very detailed and well-presented projects on Buddhism.*

RE provides extensive opportunities for pupils of all ages to develop their speaking and listening skills. Pupils generally discuss with confidence and their oral progress is particularly good. They learn to express and justify their views on complex philosophical and moral issues; for example, 'Do human beings have a spirit?' For all but the most able pupils, their skills of reading and writing in religious education do not match their ability to talk and listen positively. This is partly because they have

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these skills that are transferable from other subjects but are not encouraged to apply them in RE.

Religious education teaching continues to improve. In schools where there has been significant improvement in religious education, this can often be linked to the appointment of new specialist teachers. However, the quality of religious education teaching overall remains lower than for other subjects because so much is only adequate. There are particular problems in schools with insufficient specialist religious education staff or in those that do not provide enough time for religious education to be taught in accordance with agreed syllabus requirements.

Overall, the quality of lesson planning in religious education has improved and in the best cases ensures the most effective use of the time available to the subject. Good planning includes clear and challenging learning objectives. These are communicated to pupils, who know what is expected of them and understand the teacher's high expectations for their work. Focused and purposeful homework tasks are included in the planning, either to build on pupils' learning during the lesson or to prepare them for the next.

Religious education teaching is unsatisfactory in only 7% of lessons, a major improvement compared with a few years ago. Unsatisfactory teaching is characterised by poor planning that ignores the abilities and interests of pupils in the class, low expectations, a limited range of teaching styles, with over-extensive use of didactic teaching. The rare occurrences of poor teaching at Key Stage 4 occur where the GCSE objective of evaluation is not emphasised enough in the planning. Consequently, students do not get sufficient opportunity to weigh up arguments for and against an issue and come to their own reasoned opinions.

Some unsatisfactory teaching is associated with the use of non-specialists. In one school where RE was taught in integrated humanities, standards of teaching and learning in RE were low because there were no RE specialists in the school. Worksheets contained inaccuracies and misrepresentations of religions. Discussion is closed down because teachers lack subject knowledge; for example, when students ask questions, they have little opportunity to explore ideas from religious or secular perspectives, being directed back to the completion of simple information processing tasks.

The Ofsted religious education subject report 2000/01 raised the following issues that some schools should continue to address:

- deployment of staff
- differences in teaching and achievement at Key Stages 3 and 4.

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## Issues in religious education 2001/02

### Use of ICT to enhance teaching and learning in RE

Good use is made of ICT in religious education in only three in ten schools and its use is unsatisfactory in four in ten. The use of computers does not in itself transform a weak lesson into a satisfactory one or a satisfactory teacher into a good teacher. The teachers who use ICT most successfully are those who already establish clear learning objectives for lessons and have a well-honed sense of 'fitness for purpose' when using resources or setting tasks and activities to enable pupils to meet these objectives. These teachers use ICT because it is the best means of achieving their end, include ICT opportunities in the religious education scheme of work and consequently are able to book ICT suites well in advance of lessons. Some of the most effective applications of computers to extend pupils' learning result from the use of a single computer and projector to produce a large screen display.

In one school, teachers made exceptionally good use of the Internet to help a low-ability Year 8 class produce booklets on Jesus' death and resurrection.

*Pupils had to complete a high-quality work booklet on the death and resurrection of Jesus, produced by the department. Pupils viewed a series of paintings from a web site, beginning with Leonardo's 'Last Supper'. The head of department and a learning support assistant joined the class teacher to provide individual help, particularly in asking focused questions that helped pupils to apply what they had already learnt to this new stimulus. This required high levels of reasoning. For example, they identified Jesus by his position in the painting and the stance and body language of the others. Pupils realised that there were no definitive answers to some questions (for example, 'Which one is Judas?') and that each of their opinions was equally valid. The use of ICT enabled pupils to move onto the next painting at their own speed. Pupils worked at a good pace and by the end of the lesson most had completed the booklet electronically or by hand. At the end of the lesson, pupils were taken to the religious education room to review the lesson. This was a good strategy, which removed them from the distractions of the computer suite.*

In this lesson ICT was used to add value to lessons that would have been good even without its use. At all key stages pupils work most efficiently when teachers either direct them to use one or two specific sites or when they use sites already downloaded or created on the school intranet. The best strategies prevent pupils wasting time by searching unsuitable sites.

Teachers sometimes assume, mistakenly, that the use of the Internet as an alternative to textbooks will automatically motivate pupils. Some of the worst examples of ICT use in religious education lessons are those where teachers ask pupils to search the Web without a clear purpose, adequate instruction or supervision and where teachers fail to scrutinise or select sites prior to asking pupils to use them. As a result pupils are frequently confronted with inaccessible and extensive text, often written for faith communities or academics. In other lessons any benefits pupils might have gained from using computers were eradicated by the

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weakness in the tasks themselves; too often these required little more than copying from texts, simple descriptive writing or downloading graphics (for example, making Eid, Divali and Christmas cards).

A few teachers set up e-mail links to enable pupils to correspond with and learn from religious communities and organisations. While this is a valuable means of gathering first-hand evidence, it is important that teachers supervise the correspondence.

In a few instances pupils use presentation software effectively to select and summarise key points and to bring together visual, audio and written stimuli to create informative and interpretative presentations. More often, however, pupils waste time experimenting with the extensive formatting powers of the software rather than completing the task in hand. Teachers are too easily impressed with these presentations and frequently fail to challenge the use of animation that renders text difficult to read. The same problems occur with other packages such as Word or Publisher. These problems could be resolved if teachers employed the simple strategy of insisting that pupils produce their finished work in plain text before allowing any presentational formatting.

A-level students are often skilled in ICT and this contributes significantly to their progress. They use the Internet to access information about, for example, philosophers, scientific theories of the universe and ethical issues. Through the Internet they have found material not readily available in school books. Students also use presentation software or produce over-head transparencies using Word. Both activities help hone their skills in summarising key points.

For more inspection findings on the use of ICT in religious education go to [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk) and search the 'publications' section.

## **Assessment in Religious Education**

### **Management of assessment**

Assessment is most likely to be developed well in religious education where the school monitors all departments rigorously to ensure that collective policies are being implemented. It is most effective where departments have a clear understanding of its purpose and value, not just for reporting to parents, but to provide ongoing information about pupils' progress and achievements. This information is used to set targets for pupils' future learning and to determine the level of work that pupils can do.

In good departments, teachers have reliable methods for discovering pupils' abilities early in Year 7. In the absence of tests in religious education, they use the extensive pupil data available together with any information that primary schools might provide on, for example, pupils' level of performance in religious education at the end of Year 6. Some departments deem pupils to be starting Year 7 religious education at the same level as English and history. This is particularly effective in setting realistically high expectations. At the end of Year 9, teachers use evidence from ongoing assessment and end of key stage tests to determine the stage of pupils' learning prior to commencing GCSE courses. This information, together with externally



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produced data and predictions, enables them to set targets for pupils' GCSE performance.

To achieve all this, departments need a sensible and manageable assessment strategy. This should be as close as possible to the school policy but may need some modification; for example, a school requirement that every pupil's work should be marked thoroughly on a weekly basis would be impossible for an RE teacher teaching 500 different pupils a week. Assessment is manageable where it is fully integrated into curriculum planning and teaching rather than being seen as an 'add on' that required additional time. This situation can be found in only a minority of religious education departments. Some departments understand the purpose of assessment well and know what they want to achieve; others have manageable strategies. It is rare to find both.

### **Using an eight-level scale**

Many religious education departments are in the early stage of implementing the non-statutory 8-level scale issued by the QCA, or a local adaptation of the scale. This is either the consequence of the dissemination of the levels through the LEA, Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) or agreed syllabus or, regardless of the LEA, in response to the school policy that all subjects shall use levels when reporting to parents.

The introduction of level descriptions has heightened teachers' awareness of expected standards, showing up, for example, the low level of challenge in traditional tasks and the low levels of attainment reached by all, including very able pupils. Teachers' understanding of the level descriptions increases the likelihood of tasks being appropriately pitched and helps build up profiles of pupils' overall achievements. For example, in one school:

*Level descriptions are used particularly effectively to set and mark tasks based on each of the six strands of the two attainment targets. Grades are explained to pupils in relation to the level descriptions for the strand. Pupils have become aware that they find AT1 strand a) easy but b) and c) more difficult. They know that they have to improve their performance in these areas and negotiate targets with the teacher to help them understand exactly what they have to do to improve.*

A few departments have devised integrated assessment systems, bringing the grading of classwork into line with the levels. Particularly popular with pupils in one school was the practice of grading achievement against a target grade. The target grades carried easily understood criteria, loosely related to the levels, and pupils' grades reflected how far they met their target (for example, 'A' for exceeding the target grade, 'B' for achieving and 'C' for not achieving the target grade). This system gave pupils of all abilities the opportunity to gain high grades for achievement and was preferred to the previous system of awarding an attainment and effort grade (which had resulted in persistently low grades for some).

A few departments provide pupils with simplified versions of the level descriptions, which they are encouraged to use to assess their own and other pupils' work, set targets for improvement and discuss the reasons for their judgement. This helps

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them understand the learning objectives for the subject and identify the next stages in their learning. Most pupils enjoy the challenge and are remarkably astute and honest in their judgements. Self-assessment and paired assessment are particularly effective where pupils can demonstrate understanding of specific strengths and weaknesses, for example, 'I know how to set out an argument', or 'I was borderline L5/6 for *'Evaluation'*: to get a clear L6 I need to provide a more balanced argument'.

### **Using assessment to improve teaching and learning**

Pupils' chances of achieving well are improved when teachers set clear, focused objectives for lessons and learning outcomes for tasks. Effective departments provide for each major assessment detailed marking schemes, which contextualise the level descriptions to the specific task and discuss with pupils how each level/grade might be achieved. Teachers check carefully that pupils understand what they are required to do.

*This most impressive department uses the evidence from assessment to focus teaching more closely on the individual needs of pupils. This development was in part a response to the needs of the two newly qualified teachers in the department. An outstanding feature of the department is that as a result of assessment a footnote to each lesson plan identifies pupils causing concern, their target grades and special needs. During lessons, teachers target specific accessible questions to these pupils.*

Assessment is effective only when it leaves pupils clear about their attainment, their progress and their strengths and weaknesses in religious education. Grades and levels accompanied by clear and intelligible criteria give general information but nothing is as motivating to pupils as personalised oral and written feedback. Lower-attaining pupils respond particularly well when teachers' comments and oral feedback make it clear that their work is taken seriously and respected.

*Grades are accompanied by constructive comments, which not only inform pupils of what has to be done ('you need to write in more detail') but guidance on how to do it ('you need to say more about St Paul's Cathedral **as a place of worship**'). Sometimes teachers write a question to make pupils think more carefully about what they have said, for example, 'How do you know this?' or, 'You say that Catholics will never have an abortion. How does this relate to your previous statement, 'Christians will have an abortion only under certain conditions?'' Equally, comments such as 'good' or 'excellent' are accompanied by explanatory notes to help pupils remember and repeat good practice, for example, 'good reference to the text of the Qur'an for evidence'; 'You have chosen and expanded upon key questions carefully. You must now link your answer directly to the title all the way through'*

This standard of evaluation was achieved only by taking in a few books from each class each week for through marking. A disappointingly small number of teachers inform pupils of their achievements by writing constructive comments on their work. Most comments include 'good', 'excellent', 'you must finish your work'. Such comments are often as unhelpful as they are uninformative. Some departments have devised useful strategies for getting best value out of a limited marking load each week by identifying common misunderstandings and mistakes through marking a sample of books. These are drawn to the attention of the class with clarification.

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Teachers also show the class to examples of good work, such as interesting ideas, the good use of evidence and argument and imaginative interpretation of artistic expressions of belief.

Many religious education departments have now responded to school policy by setting pupils targets for learning or attainment, but there remains a wide variation in the quality of practice. Helpful targets are directly related to the learning objectives for the subject and specify what pupils need to do and how to do it. For example, a constructive long-term target says:

Improve evaluations by (i) saying what you think and explaining **why** (ii) giving a different point of view and explaining **why** some people hold it (iii) saying **why** you disagree with this view. **Quote the sources of evidence**'.

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# ASSOCIATION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION INSPECTORS, ADVISERS AND CONSULTANTS

## Response to the Churches' Proposal for a Statutory National Syllabus for Religious Education

The recently published QCA feasibility study presents a convincing case for a non-statutory national framework, which is welcomed by The Association of Religious Education Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC). However, AREIAC has serious reservations about the proposal put forward by three Church education bodies to the Secretary of State, recommending the development of a statutory national syllabus for religious education.

1. **It would undermine Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACREs).** The local prerogative, through SACREs, is very well established and, whilst there is recognised diversity of practice, the model is effective for the leadership of a subject which reflects local circumstances more than any other. The local SACRE provides a unique forum for collaboration between the Local Authority, the RE professionals and representatives of local faith communities. It also offers real opportunities for much needed inter-faith dialogue. It is a worthwhile and productive way to serve the community; it is citizenship in action. The Churches' proposal, although it leaves SACREs in place, reduces their autonomy and would severely undermine the goodwill of volunteers and their collective impact.
2. **It would abolish local Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs).** The process of creating a new local agreed syllabus is a real opportunity for creativity in the LEA. In the best practice, it involves teachers and is a valuable form of professional development. The activities of an ASC, often involving many of those who serve on SACRE, provide the context for debate about the nature of the subject and its purpose. If this function were taken from local determination, understanding of the philosophy for the subject would be diminished. Local debate would be minimal. National prescription would not, however, diminish the sensitivities required in the provision of RE.
3. **It would require changes to primary legislation.** Any change to the law should be one that contributes to racial harmony. This is nowhere better achieved than through the present work of dedicated local communities. At a time when there is, more than ever, a need to build on positive community relations and nurture the common good, this proposal will be divisive. The debate that would ensue would be damaging, not only to the subject but potentially to society. Religious education has improved in many areas in recent years as a result of the implementation of locally agreed syllabuses. Ofsted confirms that the vast majority of schools implement their locally agreed syllabuses, all of which meet the current statutory requirements. The changes under consideration will weaken contributions from faith communities.
4. **It would increase prescription.** Teachers are being encouraged to be innovative in their practice. This is challenging because schools are conditioned to so much that is determined centrally. RE has traditionally been