

8

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

an area in which initiative has been promoted and encouraged, both in terms of syllabus design and curriculum development. To impose a syllabus would generate uniformity but stifle innovation and discourage engagement with the process. A statutory national syllabus would not be owned in the same way as one developed locally. RE would lose its local connections and, possibly, the goodwill of many of the stakeholders. It would be impoverished as a result.

5. **It would not be a national statutory syllabus for all.** Despite the Churches' initiative, voluntary aided schools would not be bound by it. This proposal would place RE in an anomalous position. It would be national but not a National Curriculum subject. The weakening of the role of SACREs is likely to lessen the commitment and the advisory support of LEAs, whilst there would be no guarantee of greater support from the government.
6. **The proposal recommends the establishment of a national ASC.** This would be impossible because the structure of the local ASC cannot be replicated. It would, therefore, be difficult to ensure appropriate representation. It was perceived by some stakeholders that the 1988 Education Reform Act accorded to Christianity a position of inappropriate supremacy. If this proposal from the Churches were to be taken up, it would serve to confirm that perception and possibly alienate members of other faith communities, when locally it is no longer an issue. The initiative itself, coming as it does without reference to any of the other faith communities or professional bodies, shows some insensitivity on the part of the signatories.

Religious education is now a success story in our schools. Although it is often still referred to as the 'Cinderella' subject, RE teachers have seen its popularity rise as the short course has taken off, and many now feel that it has more relevance to society than ever. RE is also in a unique position. Its local character is respected and prized for its distinctiveness.

A non-statutory national framework, as presented by the QCA feasibility study, would support consistency, without any of the possible damage of enforced prescription. Local SACREs would be more likely to welcome a non-statutory national framework designed to support their own curriculum development activities. It would support the raising of standards whilst maintaining effective local involvement. AREIAC supports this possibility.

AREIAC is passionate about securing good religious education. Members support SACREs to ensure high quality provision in RE and help individual schools to create effective learning experiences for pupils. As an association, it is committed to raising standards. In the opinion of the AREIAC executive, there is no guarantee that a statutory national syllabus will achieve improvement. Furthermore, the association fears that such a development could undermine the progress that has been made in the subject since the present legislation was introduced.