

What is my child being taught in RE?

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The requirements

The 1944 Education Act enshrined in law the requirement for schools to provide religious education and a daily act of collective worship which is broadly Christian in nature. Parents have the right to opt their children out of both RE lessons and collective worship. Faith schools which are not Christian (ie Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Sikh) can offer collective worship in their own faith. Many schools no longer observe the requirement for assemblies to be Christian in content.

The curriculum

The RE curriculum is decided by local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) constituted of representatives from the Church of England, Local Authorities, teachers, a range of Christian denominations and other beliefs, including humanism. In faith schools, the governing body determines curriculum content to reflect the school's distinctive faith. RE teaching jobs can be ring fenced for adherents to the faith of the school.

Good RE teaching encourages pupils to evaluate and critique beliefs and ideas, it nurtures critical thinking and it allows time for personal reflection and response. It has less to do with acquiring facts about different belief systems and more to do with understanding how those belief systems might provide people with answers to the big questions that relate to the meaning and purpose of life. The RE teaching community is comprised of people from a wide range of different faiths and includes humanists, atheists and those with no faith.

'Good RE teaching encourages pupils to evaluate and critique beliefs and ideas'

The debate

There are regular calls for collective worship to be abolished. Some groups, opposing any expression of religious belief in public spaces, suggest that this should also include church schools. Some argue that collective worship should be replaced with a time of spiritual reflection, leaving school leaders and governors to decide how best to interpret this. Some Christians think that students shouldn't be compelled to worship if they have no personal faith; others feel that Christian worship should remain a legal requirement even though the majority of pupils have no understanding of Christianity.

The role of religion and the articulation of faith in schools and colleges is under constant scrutiny. One side of the debate argues that we live in pluralist society, so teaching about religious belief and allowing faith schools to exist is causing a divided society. The other side argues that good RE teaching is one route to greater understanding between people and that expressions of religious belief are an essential part of our democratic freedom.

'Where ... should the teaching of religion be positioned in ... a pluralist society?'

Christian perspective

Part of the debate currently surrounding RE teaching centres on what the term 'religious education' actually means. Should it be instruction in one particular faith, even though this can be seen as a form of indoctrination? Should it be formative, ie forming children in a particular religious

tradition which imbues them with a set of beliefs and values, as is the practice of many church schools? Or should it be concerned with teaching students to think critically about how all beliefs shape the morality and ethics of individuals and communities? Where, within this range of understandings, should the teaching of religion be positioned in the education system of a pluralist society? What should be confined to home and church communities?

National Christian organisations, together with local groups and individuals, make a huge contribution to assemblies and the Christian elements of the RE curriculum in our schools. Often this is because Christian parents have built relationships within their children's schools and so they are trusted to suggest appropriate visitors. It is one way of ensuring that the Christian perspective continues to be shared, although visitors should never proselytise or indoctrinate ie teach pupils to believe. Students must always be left to reflect for themselves.

For more information:

- A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools
<http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/A-New-Settlement-for-Religion-and-Belief-in-schools.pdf>