

Religious education 'being edged out of school timetables' illegally



A new study warns that schools are flouting the law by dropping religious education in a move that risks leaving pupils 'ill-prepared' to make sense of faith in later life

The National Association of Teachers of Religious Education warned that RE was being sidelined in many schools.

A third of comprehensives are breaking the law by dropping religious education lessons for teenagers, a new study has found.

Hundreds of thousands of pupils are missing out on RE because the subject is being “edged out” of timetables by government GCSE reforms, it was claimed.

Researchers found that the equivalent of 900 state secondaries were axing the subject between the age of 14 and 16 to find more time for other disciplines.

The disclosure sparked claims that pupils were "unable to respond to different views and beliefs in an informed, rational and insightful way".

It also emerged that schools were cutting the number of specialist RE teachers, placing lessons in the hands of untrained staff and steering pupils away from taking qualifications in the subject.

The National Association of Teachers of Religious Education warned that the development was a direct result of Government reforms such as the English Baccalaureate – a new league table measure.

Under the change, pupils are awarded the “EBacc” for gaining good GCSEs in the key disciplines of English, maths, science, foreign languages and history or geography.

But it is claimed that the exclusion of RE from the system was having a major impact on the subject – forcing schools to drop it in favour of other core disciplines.

It comes just over a month after Ofsted warned that pupils were leaving school with a “very limited understanding” of Christianity because of an alarming dip in standards of RE.

Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, has also admitted that RE has been an “unintended casualty” of the government’s reform programme.

Religious education is a compulsory subject throughout primary and secondary school and teachers must provide lessons even if pupils fail to take a GCSE in the subject.

But today’s study found that:

- Some 33 per cent of non-religious secondary schools and 35 per cent of academies were failing to offer the subject at all for GCSE-age pupils – 14- to 16-year-olds;
- A total of 26 per cent of schools were shunning the subject when religious secondaries were factored in;
- Around one-in-eight school – 12 per cent – were also failing to offer RE as a subject for pupils aged 11-to-14;
- Even where the subject was offered, some 16 per cent of schools reported a reduction in the amount of time devoted to it in Year 10, the first year of GCSEs;
- Some 57 per cent of schools said no pupils were taking the popular “short-course” GCSE in religious studies, while 12 per cent reported no entries for the full version;
- A fifth of school reported a cut on specialist RE teachers in 2013/14 and 42 per cent claimed that at least one-in-10 lessons in the subject were delivered by staff trained in other disciplines.

The study was compiled following a survey of 580 religious education teachers across England.

Ed Pawson, NATRE chairman, said: “The EBacc has edged RE out of the school curriculum and pupils are losing out on valuable education about the world’s faith and belief systems.

“Good RE is a vital part of a pupil’s whole education... Yet this research shows that schools are squeezing RE into less time and unfilled timetable slots, often with teachers lacking in adequate training or support.”

Stephen Lloyd, the Lib Dem MP and chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group for RE, said: “When RE is diluted, young people leave school ill-prepared to make sense of religion and belief and unable to respond to different views and beliefs in an informed, rational and insightful way.

“It’s vital we work closely with ministers and education officials to ensure RE is not sidelined.”

But Stephen Evans, campaigns manager of the National Secular Society, said: "Without any clear educational purpose it is not surprising that many schools fails to take religious education seriously.

“Education about religion and belief needs to be revitalised by scrapping the dated concept of RE and replacing it with a new National Curriculum subject for all pupils that teaches objectively about a range of religious and non-religious beliefs.

"Such a subject would allow pupils to take a more balanced approach to the consideration of moral and ethical issues."

A Department for Education spokeswoman said: “Our new curriculum ensures RE will remain a compulsory subject for every pupil until they leave school.”

Graeme Paton - The Telegraph