



Standing Advisory Council
on Religious Education in
South Gloucestershire

To all Headteachers, Heads of RE and RE co-ordinators in maintained schools.

Dear Colleagues, **Parental requests to withdraw their children from RE**

Over the past few years some parts of the UK have seen an increase in parental requests to withdraw their child from RE in schools when the RE programme of study starts to cover particular areas of the Agreed Syllabus. This letter, and accompanying guidance, seeks to clarify the statutory position for both Primary and Secondary schools, parents' right to withdraw and issues related to parents exercising that right.

Firstly, maintained schools have a legal responsibility to deliver the Agreed Syllabus for RE which includes the study of a range of religious faiths. A school cannot therefore avoid teaching about any one major faith in order to avoid a situation arising where parents might seek withdrawal.

Secondly, it is also clear from the legislation that parents do have a right to withdraw their child from any part of the RE programme of study and schools have a legal responsibility to ensure that this can happen. It is not for the school to stand in the way of parents exercising that right. Indeed, parents are not obliged by statute to give any reason for requesting withdrawal despite the expectation that schools will engage with parents. Difficulties have arisen when parents have perceived the school's engagement as too intrusive and SACRE would advise schools to act with sensitivity when dealing with requests.

What should schools do? It is clear from DfES guidance (Circular 1/94) that Head teachers should engage with parents who express a wish to withdraw their child from RE, whether in whole or in part, to see whether any accommodation can be made which would allow the continued inclusion of the pupil in RE. There may well be a need to clarify any misunderstandings in relation to the Agreed Syllabus. In doing so the following points may be useful:

- Faiths, such as Islam, are important and complex religions, with traditions in Britain, both historically and currently, and pupils need an opportunity to understand them as they affect Britain today;
- The Agreed Syllabus helps pupils understand that complexity enabling them to break down commonly held misconceptions and stereotypes;
- Media presentations of religious issues often focus on extremes and pupils need to have an opportunity to challenge the media's portrayal of these;
- RE does not seek to make pupils religious or to assent to a religious position. Instead it seeks to broaden their education as they grow into civilised and educated adults. Research by OFTSED has shown that RE makes a higher contribution than any other subject in preparing pupils for adult life.
- Employers (especially in the police, armed forces, journalism, broadcasting and caring professions) regard GCSE Religious Studies as a good

qualification. It involves critical thinking and discussion skills; it increases awareness of other people's beliefs, and deepens understanding of our society and the world in which we live.

- In helping pupils think through some of the big issues of life, it prepares them for working and dealing with people of different cultures and beliefs. It also gives them skills that help them with their other subjects, for example empathy and evaluation. If they are withdrawn from RE they may not do as well in those other subjects.

After such clarification, where parents still want to withdraw their child from RE it is important that schools make the following points to them:

1. Religious Education is delivered through the Agreed Syllabus and is part of the Basic Curriculum. Pupils will still however encounter faiths such as Islam in other subject areas such as Citizenship; parents cannot withdraw their child from such subjects which are in the National Curriculum.
2. It is not acceptable that withdrawal leads to an undermining of the school's responsibility to provide the Basic Curriculum set out in legislation. The expectation of SACRE is therefore that where parents withdraw their child from RE, in whole or in part, they will provide work for their own child to support their family's beliefs during the period of withdrawal. Parents do have rights under the School Standard and Framework Act 1998 and should be made aware of the options at their disposal.

The following could be used in a letter to parents regarding partial withdrawal from RE:

Dear

Thank-you for informing me of your desire to withdraw your child from religious education when the subject of XXX is being covered. I have spoken to the Head of RE/your child's class teacher and s/he has informed me that XXX will be covered at KS3/2/1 during the following times:

RE/All staff have been made aware that your child will be supervised in an area designated for this purpose during the identified RE lessons. It will be the responsibility of your child to ensure that staff know they are present in the school while they are being withdrawn. During the time of withdrawal you should supply your child with materials to study which will strengthen them in your own religious or philosophical beliefs. It is not acceptable that your child does work in relation to other curriculum areas during this time.

I also need to make you aware that there will be times when your child will encounter the study of XXX, not as part of RE, but in other subjects especially Citizenship. Your child will not be removed from these sessions as the right to withdrawal in this case only covers RE, but not the National Curriculum. If you need further clarification on this issue please feel free to contact me.

You can at any time reconsider your decision to withdraw your child from RE and if you do wish your child to be included in RE when XXX is being taught please write to me again and I will ensure that RE/all staff know.

Yours sincerely etc...

The full guidance on issues relating to withdrawal from RE is being sent with this letter. It can also be found on the South Gloucestershire SACRE website at: <http://www.learningwithsouthglos.org.uk/REandSACRE/>

If you have any queries about this letter please contact the L.A. Serving Officer for SACRE, Antony Evans on 01454 863269. SACRE can also be contacted via its Clerk: Joanna Wallis, 4 Kidney Hill, Westerleigh, BS37 8QY.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. K. Cradock', with a horizontal line underneath.

Alderman Colin Cradock
Chair of South Gloucestershire SACRE