

Vested interest claims schools are flouting RE legal obligations

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According to the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE), a third of secondary schools in England and Wales are not meeting legal requirements for teaching religious education.

NATRE surveyed 625 schools in the light of the exclusion of RE from the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) – the measure of school performance introduced in 2010 that focuses on the percentage of students achieving grades A* to C in GCSE English, maths, two sciences, a foreign language and history or geography.

State schools are required by law to teach RE to all pupils unless parents choose to withdraw them from these lessons.

But the NATRE study – which assessed the status of RE in schools by focusing on the provision of religious studies (RS) at GCSE through data such as exam entries and space allocated to the subject in lessons timetables – found that the legal requirement was not being fulfilled for the 14–16 age group.

Nearly 40 per cent of "faith schools" that responded to the study were found to have entered fewer than three-quarters of their eligible pupils for the GCSE RE exam. A quarter of schools had cut specialist RE teachers posts. (When rephrased to "over 60 per cent of 'faith schools' were found to have entered more than three-quarters of their eligible pupils for the GCSE RE exam", one wonders what the fuss is about.)

The executive officer for NATRE, Rosemary Rivett, said: "The evidence shows that whether or not ministers intended it, next year's school leavers will be less religiously educated than those who did so when the Coalition came to power."

The Department for Education said that RE remained a statutory part of the wider school curriculum for every single student up to the age of 18."

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "Could there be a reason why fully qualified RE teachers are so thin on the ground? Could it be that there is a dwindling interest in the subject?"

Mr Sanderson said that there were indications that schools were inviting in extremist outside bodies to fill the gap. He said that the number of evangelical groups now targeting schools was increasing.

"There may not be so much formal religious education but we are hearing of an increase in other religious activities, such as Alpha Courses and Gideon groups handing out bibles. There is also a significant increase in the number of schools advertising for (entirely publicly-funded) dedicated religious chaplains whose job it is not only to provide regular religious worship but also to spread their influence throughout the school day."

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