



Curriculum for Wales: Religion, Values & Ethics Consultation

May 2020

This briefing is to inform our members and supporters of the Welsh Government's current consultation and plans to reform the teaching of religious education in Wales, as part of the proposed updated Curriculum for Wales.

Introduction

The National Secular Society welcomes the Welsh Government's intention to replace Religious Education with the teaching of Religion, Values & Ethics and recognises the progress made towards a more pluralistic and balanced curriculum, in line with what we should expect our schools to teach in the 21st century.

However, the current proposals continue to fall short. We remain very concerned that these proposals will continue to perpetuate existing problems regarding the privileged control faith groups already have over the curriculum, and create new problems, specifically with the removal of the right to withdraw whilst denominational RVE is still being taught across certain schools.

A summary of our key concerns

- **The current proposals will create a dual system regarding the teaching of RVE across Wales, exacerbating a divisive approach to how the subject is taught.**
- **We find it difficult to see how, in practice, faith schools will run two RVE curricula in parallel and that a biased and confessional approach to RVE will still dominate in many schools – creating unnecessary segregation in the teaching of religion, values and ethics.**
- **We are deeply concerned at the message this dual approach would send to children across Wales and believe this runs counter to the ambitions that Welsh Government has set out to achieve with its reforms. Children across Wales should all have the same entitlement to a pluralistic, objective and balanced RVE curriculum; this should not be put at risk simply because of the type of school they attend.**

As such, the NSS is urging the Welsh Government to reassess its proposals in order to implement a religion, values and ethics curriculum that is genuinely pluralistic and balanced. To achieve this, we are calling on the Welsh Government to:

- Implement a duty on all schools to teach an objective, critical, and pluralistic RVE syllabus, without exception.
- Abolish SACREs, so that religious interest groups do not control the subject.
- Pause on removing the right to withdrawal until the new curriculum has had time to bed in.

The support of NSS members will be critical in helping us to seek transformative change to the teaching of RVE in Wales – which could act as an exemplar for how the subject should be taught across the UK, more widely.

We urge members to participate in the online consultation and also write directly to their MS to raise this issue with them.

How do I respond?

The government consultation runs until Tuesday 28 July 2020. Our website has information on all the questions, and details on how you can use this briefing to formulate your response. We are also running our own online survey and have a template letter for you to write to your Senedd members.

Please visit secularism.org.uk/RVE-Wales for more information.

What's happening?

The Welsh government has launched a consultation on legislative changes to replace:

- Religious Education (RVE) with Religion, values and ethics (RVE)
- The right to withdraw from RE, with the right to request access to a pluralistic RVE syllabus in faith schools

What does this mean?

- Community schools (and others without a religious character) in Wales will be required to teach a pluralistic RVE syllabus. This means it is designed to be inclusive, balanced and critical.
- Faith schools will be required to provide for both a **pluralistic** and **denominational** RVE syllabus. **Denominational** RVE will be designed in accordance with the faith of the school.
- In Voluntary Controlled faith schools, the pluralistic RVE syllabus is the default and parents can opt into the Denominational syllabus.
- In Voluntary aided faith schools, the **denominational** RVE syllabus is the default and parents can opt into the **pluralistic** syllabus.
- There will be no right to withdraw pupils from RVE altogether.

Is this good news?

- For many parents yes. In our experience, few if any, parents object to their children learning about a diversity of religions and beliefs. Those that exercise their right to withdraw their children from RE, particularly in faith schools, do so due to poor quality, biased or confessional teaching.
- If there is an opportunity for all pupils to receive a high quality, genuinely balanced RVE curriculum, this will be welcomed by many. We also welcome the Welsh government's admirable progress to modernise RVE, and make it more inclusive, particularly of Wales' increasing diverse and non-religious society.
- However, by retaining faith groups' privileged control of the RVE curriculum, these proposals undermine attempts to make RVE genuinely objective, critical, and pluralistic,
- Parents, particularly in faith schools, may still find their children receiving biased RVE designed to promote faith, but without recourse to the right to withdraw.

What are the problems?

There are existing problems with RE which these proposals don't go far enough to address, and new problems they risk creating.

Existing problems

- Faith schools can use the subject to promote religion in general and their religious outlook specifically, through the **denominational** syllabus. This will continue to deny many pupils in Wales access to genuinely non-partisan and balanced education about the full range of religious and non-religious worldviews.
- For example, the current Church in Wales' scheme of work for RE between Nursery and Year 6 requires that 88% of teaching time is dedicated to Christianity. The great majority of units specified are 100% focused on Christianity and even in the minority of units which cover other faiths, these are still largely framed in reference to Christianity. The Catholic Education Service's (CES) religious education directory states that "The primary purpose of Catholic Religious Education is to come to know and understand God's revelation". A unit by unit breakdown is not available, but at KS4 the CES estimates that 85 to 90% of RE curriculum time is focused on Catholicism.
- Even for the **agreed pluralistic** RVE syllabi, the privileged role of religious interest groups will be maintained by the retention of SACREs (Standing Advisory Council's on Religious Education). Though in an effort at inclusion, these are likely to all now include 'Humanist' representatives to represent the non-religious. While there will be a national framework provided by the Curriculum for Wales, SACREs and ASCs (Agreed Syllabus Committees) will still create locally agreed RVE syllabi.
- The title of the subject still frames religion as the default, and this is just one of the ways that the opportunity has been missed to address systemic bias. This is despite a 2015 High Court ruling that religious education in schools without a religious character must be "objective, critical, and pluralistic", and that "the state must accord equal respect to different religious convictions, and to non-religious beliefs."
- Research shows that most RE teachers regard it as their responsibility to promote a positive view of religion, while addressing and framing negative manifestations of religion as "false" or "distorted". The 2018 study *Bad Religion as False Religion*, found that 60% of religious education teachers across the UK "absolutely agree" that "religion should be taught in a positive way in RE". Only 6% did not agree.

New problems

- Although the provision of a pluralistic option being made available is positive, it is difficult to see how faith schools are going to run two RVE syllabi in parallel, one objective and one confessional. This could be confusing for pupils and will build division into the teaching of RVE.
- Faith schools in Wales vary widely in terms of how aggressively they promote their religious ethos, but many would be likely to pressure parents to 'choose' the **denominational** RVE 'option'. The **agreed pluralistic** RVE option may as a result be under resourced and stigmatised.

- Where a religious ethos permeates all aspects of a faith school (and they are inspected by the religious body to ensure it does) then it is hard to see how this will not impact the **agreed pluralistic** RVE option, particularly as in VA faith schools where teachers are often selected on religious grounds.
- Without a right to withdraw the delivery of RVE will be liable to legal challenge where it is not genuinely “objective, critical, and pluralistic”. The right of withdrawal currently exists to protect parents’ and children’s rights under Article 9 of European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which provides a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. There is a large body of human rights case law that suggests that scrapping this right will be unlawful.

How could the proposals be improved?

- The duty to teach a non-denominational and pluralistic RVE syllabus should apply to all schools without exception for religious designations. Faith and belief formation should be the responsibility of those families and communities, not of state education.
- The role of SACREs should be abolished. Schools should be supported and can support each other to adapt and deliver the RVE curriculum, but religious interest groups should not have a special input.
- The right to withdraw should not be phased out, at least until there has been time for the new RVE curriculum to fully bed in and been assessed to ensure it is genuinely critical, objective and pluralistic. This test will not be met until this area of the curriculum is liberated from the influence and control of religious interest groups.

For more information please visit secularism.org.uk/RVE-Wales