

Religious Education: advice on sensitivity

From time to time, sensitive issues in religious education can cause upset and conflict with parents and local communities. It is useful to hold a few key principles and protocols in mind. We hope these points are helpful.

- 1. The RE curriculum should include a range of different faiths and cover sensitive and controversial issues as appropriate.**

RE provides understanding of a range of faiths and beliefs; it stimulates analytical thinking; and it nurtures tolerance of diversity in the world we all share. This means the subject, quite rightly, sometimes touches on sensitive and controversial issues. Properly and professionally handled, school should provide a place of safety and integrity for pupils to grapple with such issues. Fear of 'treading on eggshells' and resulting self-censorship would be depriving pupils of vital opportunities. The local agreed syllabus suggests content and materials that may be useful.

- 2. Schools and teachers must be alert to sensitive religious and cultural issues.**

Teaching must always be informed by professional integrity, empathy and awareness, particularly in the use of resources. There is particular sensitivity for Muslims over pictures and cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad. This is exacerbated when they have political undertones. Muslims do not feel the Prophet should be depicted as Islam forbids any possibility of worshipping images. Also, a picture could not do justice to the reverence and authority given by Muslims to the Prophet. The same applies to other prophets and, indeed, some Muslims do not picture any human being or animal for similar reasons. While it is appropriate for pupils to learn about religious or political extremism in an age- and context-appropriate way, displaying actual material that may cause hurt and misunderstanding is unnecessary and unhelpful in a classroom situation. Similar principles apply to other areas of sensitivity. Diligence and straightforward kindness should guide teaching here.

- 3. Resources must be appropriate in terms of learning content, quality and sensitivity.**

If teachers use ready-made materials, they should be checked thoroughly to satisfy these requirements. 'Off the peg' resources such as PowerPoints from the internet can be useful for teachers under pressure but they can also be fraught with difficulties. Great care should be taken to avoid asking children to do or say something that involves them assenting (or appearing to assent) to the claims of any faith. It is important to remember that perceptions are important, as misunderstandings can quickly become inflamed with passion and anger.

- 4. Nurture good lines of communication with parents and faith communities.**

This is a long-term investment. Mistakes and misunderstandings will happen. Any potential difficulties are much more likely to be resolved quickly when there are good ongoing relationships and an atmosphere of trust. This may be through formal and informal networks

and will include transparent and open communication of what is taught in RE and a willingness to listen to suggestions or concerns. This is not the same as a right of veto.

5. **All schools, including academies, must adopt a coherent RE syllabus not just collate a list of units of work.**

A syllabus must conform to the requirements of the law and will provide an overall pedagogical and disciplinary framework for RE. ***Believing and Belonging*** is the locally written syllabus now adopted by four out of five of West Yorkshire's local authorities and is available free to all local schools and academies. Academies may choose to adopt an alternative to the local agreed syllabus. There are alternatives available for sale from other local authorities and commercial providers. However, we very strongly advise that this does not simply mean selecting a list of topics.

6. **Advice on sensitivity to wider religious issues in school is available for all local schools and academies.**

Teachers or senior leaders who have any questions, concerns or doubts are welcome to contact local RE advisers. For details email enquiries@penninelearning.com

April 2021