

Dear Editor

It was with some concern that I read 'England Needs a National RE Syllabus' by Kathleen Wood in the Spring 2004 edition of *ACT Now*.

I have been a Salvation Army Representative on the Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin SACRE for ten years. I am the Head of RE in a large comprehensive school in Telford. Opportunities have also been given to me to write teaching materials for QCA and I hold an MEd in Religious Education. I offer this information so you can appreciate something of my background. But, first and foremost, I am writing this letter in my capacity as a very concerned RE teacher with experience in current trends in schools.

The article published in the last *ACT Now* magazine implied that those involved in education from a Free Church background who share an interest in raising standards in RE also share a general understanding that a national syllabus for RE should be adopted. I disagree.

Whilst I accept that statistics or surveys may 'suggest' certain trends, the reality is often very different. It is my experience as a teacher in a comprehensive secondary school with 14 different feeder primaries that standards in KS2 are not 'steadily rising' and the majority of pupils arrive with very little knowledge. This is because RE does not receive enough lesson time in KS2.

By the same token standards at KS3 are often good and, where they are not, this is not due to a lack of a 'good syllabus' (which we do have in our county). It indicates the relative status of RE in the school and/or the ability of teachers to teach the subject whether a syllabus is provided or not!

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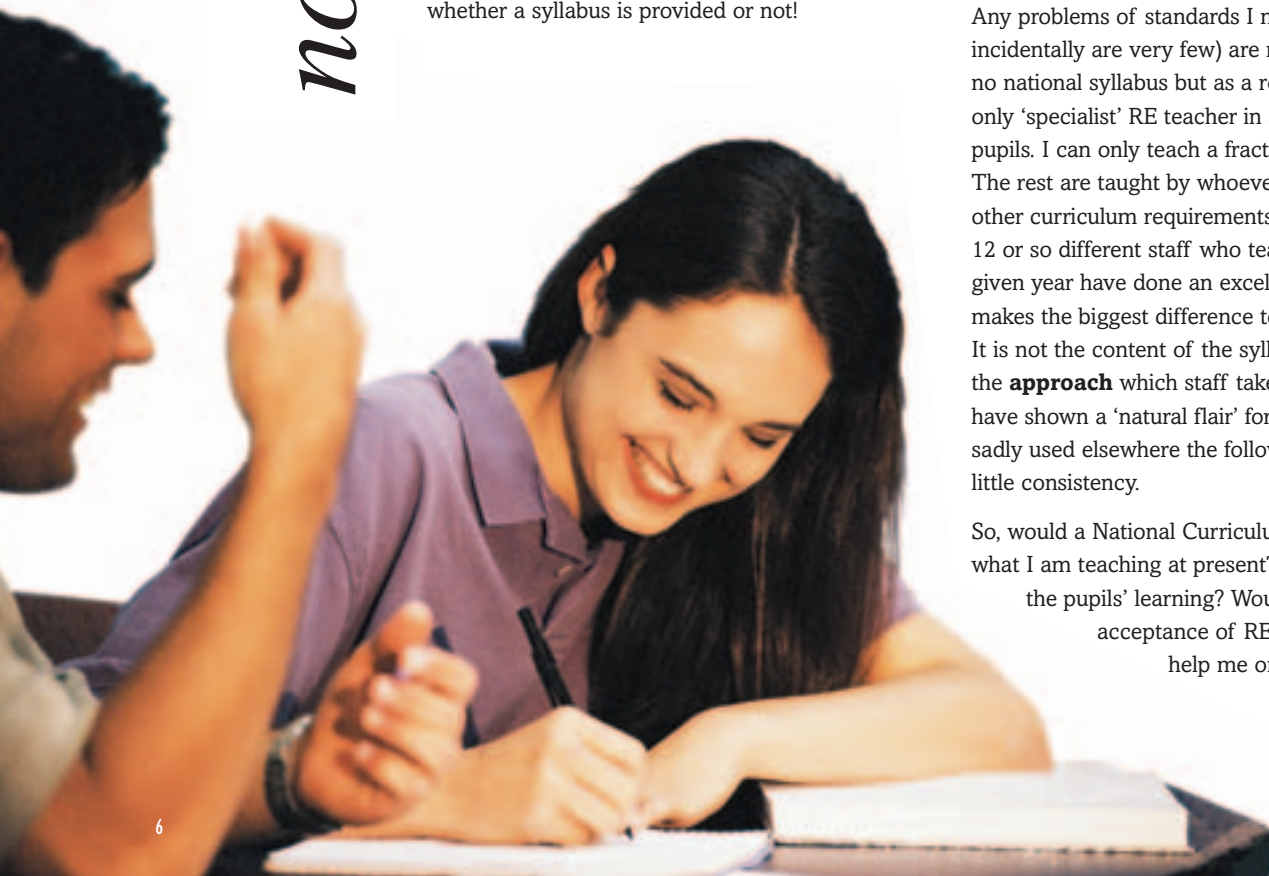
I have for the last two years with other colleagues been rewriting the Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin Syllabus. This is now an excellent document that meets the needs of our county and has involved teachers from all Key Stages. To 'abandon' this for a 'statutory' framework (that would probably not be as good as the present scheme) makes no sense at all.

I accept that 48% of schools may fail to comply with legal requirements. I do not accept that this would be helped by a National Curriculum. I believe there are too few RE teachers and not enough 'value' is placed on RE by senior managers. Making the contents of a curriculum 'compulsory' will not change attitudes. (Legislation has done nothing to enhance Acts of Worship.)

When I arrived at my present school there was no RE. There was no RE syllabus. There were no RE resources. The school did not need a National Curriculum. It needed to change its attitude towards RE. I set about convincing pupils and teachers what RE could offer to pupils and the ethos in the school. I was supported by the County RE Adviser and the local SACRE. Today we are a thriving, well respected department.

Any problems of standards I may have (which incidentally are very few) are not because there is no national syllabus but as a result of me being the only 'specialist' RE teacher in a school of 1,200 pupils. I can only teach a fraction of the pupils. The rest are taught by whoever is 'left over' after other curriculum requirements have been met. The 12 or so different staff who teach RE for me in any given year have done an excellent job. But what makes the biggest difference to the quality of RE? It is not the content of the syllabus I provide, it is the **approach** which staff take. Many teachers have shown a 'natural flair' for teaching RE but are sadly used elsewhere the following year so there is little consistency.

So, would a National Curriculum be preferable to what I am teaching at present? Would it enhance the pupils' learning? Would it improve the acceptance of RE in school? Would it help me or my colleagues to



teach any better? An affirmative answer to any of these questions is doubtful.

I understand if there is no 'strong' RE presence in a school or if a SACRE (for whatever reason) is unable to function properly then further support is needed. But does this have to be statutory for everyone? After all, what is wrong with non-statutory guidance? A National Syllabus is not the answer.

In my opinion, for standards to improve in RE, we need the following.

- An acceptance by senior managers that RE is an important subject in the education of pupils which deserves appropriate timetabling, resourcing and staffing.
- All schools should have a specialist RE teacher. (Why are potential teachers of RE not offered a monetary enhancement as is the case for prospective teachers of mathematics?)
- Consistency of staffing where 'non-specialists' have to be used. Extra training and support should be given.
- All local SACREs to be supported by an RE Adviser. (We have been very well supported until December 2003 when on the retirement of the Adviser, it appears a similar replacement will not be given.) RE Advisers are becoming a

rare breed, either lost to other subjects or lost in the round of inspection and criticism rather than of help and support. (I would suggest such a brief is imposed on LEAs.)

- More subject-related support should be given by counties and more power to ensure that this is implemented in schools. (Often the only time an Adviser is called to a school is after the problems have been discovered. More 'real' RE Advisers would ensure local education is as it should be and would enable them to get to know and support their teachers.)
- The 'opt out' clause to be removed. If RE is taught as it should be there is no reason why any pupils should be withdrawn from lessons as this undermines the relevance and importance of the subject.

Perhaps a little more consultation with serving RE teachers through Advisers and SACREs could be used to gain opinions and contribute to any future 'non-statutory' guidance.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Catherine Pocock
Head of RE, Abraham Darby School, Telford

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