

## **BRIEFING NOTE**

**May 21, 2013**

To: Minister of State for Schools, Rt Hon David Laws MP  
From: John Keast OBE, Chair of the RE Council

### **The case for reinstating results for the GCSE short course for RE to school league table points**

This paper:

- traces the benefits of the GCSE short course to standards in RE and legal compliance from its initiation in 1966
- argues that the government should give special recognition to the status of the GCSE short course in RE.

#### **The benefits of the GCSE short course to standards in RE and legal compliance**

1. RE has been a statutory subject for all pupils since 1944. The extent to which schools complied with legislation in the 1940's- 1970s is unknown but in the 1980s and early 90s non-compliance was rife, particularly at Key Stage 4 and in the 6th form. Some schools taught RE only to those pupils who took the subject as an O Level and A Level option. HMI reports on RE in the 1980s were 'gloomy' and 'stated quite clearly that there isn't RE for all registered pupils' (TES)<sup>i</sup>. As late as 1996, 'The inadequate provision of basic courses beyond Key Stage 3 in many schools means that many pupils do not progress in religious awareness or maintain appropriate standards in RE' (Ofsted)<sup>ii</sup>.
2. The TES (ibid) attributes the 'revival' of RE to rigorous Ofsted inspections, the efforts of the Secretary of State for Education, John Patten and the work of Chris Woodhead's School Curriculum and Assessment Authority. A particularly effective initiative (Woodhead and Patten) designed to offer schools an incentive to take RE seriously was the introduction of the GCSE Short Course in RE in 1996. The short course was designed to be taught in one hour a week throughout Key Stage 4, the time recommended by most SACREs. The initiative was designed to provide motivation to pupils and staff. It was also anticipated that it would lead to a growth in A Level RS uptake, which would in turn increase the number of students working towards a career in RE teaching.
3. From its introduction the short course led to improvements in compliance and standards. In 2001 the Minister of State for Schools reported that 'Ofsted has consistently noted that where pupils are following a GCSE course, teaching, learning, monitoring, assessment and recording all improve...The most significant improvement over the last two years has been in the quality of RE at Key Stage 4 compared to Key Stage 3 in those schools where all pupils are following a GCSE short course. (Baroness Blatch<sup>iii</sup>).
4. The short course has been enormously successful and at its peak in 2008 around 275,000 pupils gained the award. So popular has it been that some schools have begun to extend GCSE entry for the full course to all pupils. In 2012 over 350,000 pupils were awarded a GCSE full or short course in RE. Ofsted has reported consistently that standards are highest at Key Stage 4

where pupils are preparing for a GCSE examination. A Level results have also increased steadily to nearly 19,000 in 2012.

### **The government should give special recognition to the status of the GCSE short course in RE**

5. The GCSE Short Course is one of the few initiatives in education that can be shown to have raised standards. It is now showing its age and although the principle of a short course for RE remains as valid as in the 90s the courses on offer from the examination boards are in need of revision and an injection of rigour.
6. The APPG inquiry into the supply of and support for teachers of RE<sup>iv</sup> found that 'The government's decision not to include short course results in the league table points for schools is already leading to a reduction in the number of schools entering all pupils for a GCSE exam and to increased non-compliance at Key Stage 4'. (APPG for RE<sup>v</sup>).
7. Pupils and teachers work in an education system where only those academic courses that lead to a qualification are perceived to have value. To revert to RE courses at Key Stage 4 which comply with statutory requirements without leading to a qualification would hold little attraction for pupils, parents, head teachers and governors. If the government and Ofsted are serious in their expectation that schools should keep the law where RE is concerned, then the subject must be given value in the school's point score. As one head teacher commented during the APPG inquiry, 'I am under pressure from my governors and sponsors to climb the league tables. I value what RE gives my pupils but I am struggling to argue for giving it time that could go to subjects that contribute to our point scores. I need the government to give me a bit of help here'.
8. RE occupies a special place in the curriculum. It is statutory for all pupils and we have repeated assurances from the government that this status will be unchanged. In recognition of this assurance we call on the government to review its decision to withdraw league table points from the short course and in this way support schools that want to teach RE to the highest standards.

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<sup>i</sup> Nicholas Pyke (1995). RE slowly starts to rise from the dead. TES October 13, 1995

<sup>ii</sup> Ofsted. HMCI Annual Report p145

<sup>iii</sup> St Gabriel's Trust. (2001) Whose Responsibility? The balance between local and national in RE St Gabriel's Conference Proceedings.

<sup>iv</sup> APPG for RE (2013). *The Truth Unmasked*. 4.11.