

Real curriculum time for Religious Education — an urgent leadership priority



A strategic leadership brief for headteachers, senior leaders and governors

Religious Education (RE) is too often treated as peripheral — squeezed into tutor time, assemblies, or allocated significantly less curriculum time than other foundation subjects such as history and geography. This is not simply an issue of balance or fairness. It has clear consequences for pupil attainment, equity, and preparedness for life in the modern world, and it increasingly places schools out of step with national policy direction.

1) Weakly framed RE short-changes pupils

Ofsted's Deep and meaningful? The Religious Education subject report (2024) is unequivocal: where RE is not taught through regular, timetabled lessons, curriculum ambition and progression suffer. In schools where RE is delivered mainly through assemblies, tutor time or occasional drop-down days, pupils rarely build the substantive knowledge and disciplinary understanding required for high-quality RE. Retention is weaker, progression is unclear, and the subject becomes difficult to distinguish as a curriculum discipline.

This mirrors what Ofsted finds in other subjects when curriculum time is eroded — but the difference is that RE is far more likely than other foundation subjects to be treated this way, particularly at Key Stage 3. Where RE receives less time than history or geography, pupils are systematically disadvantaged in their access to disciplinary knowledge about religion and belief.

2) GCSE Religious Studies: strong evidence on attainment and equity

Evidence highlighted by NATRE, drawing on Department for Education data and reported in relation to a written parliamentary question, demonstrates a striking pattern:

- Pupils who take GCSE Religious Studies (RS) achieve, on average, 4 Progress 8 points more across their qualifications than those who do not take RS.
- For disadvantaged pupils, the difference is even more pronounced: those who take RS achieve, on average, 9 Progress 8 points more than disadvantaged pupils who do not.

This is a substantial attainment difference and is larger — not smaller — for disadvantaged pupils. Pupils cannot benefit from RS GCSE unless they have had sufficient curriculum time and progression at Key Stage 3.

3) Foundation subjects and curriculum parity

English, mathematics and science are core subjects. History and geography are foundation subjects. RE belongs in this same curricular space, providing essential cultural, ethical and disciplinary knowledge. Yet in many schools it continues to receive less curriculum time than other foundation subjects, particularly at KS3.

4) Accountability reform strengthens the case for more RE time across KS3 and KS4

At Key Stage 4, opportunities for pupils to study GCSE Religious Studies have often been more limited than for history and geography, not because of educational value but because RS has sat outside the Humanities component of the EBacc measure. This created a structural incentive to

prioritise other subjects and reduced curriculum investment in RE earlier in secondary schooling.

That accountability context is now changing. The Curriculum and Assessment Review recommends removal of the EBacc as a headline performance measure and retention of Progress 8 in a revised form, with a stronger emphasis on academic breadth rather than compliance with a narrow subject set. This removes a longstanding disincentive to investing curriculum time in RE and strengthens the case for treating it on a par with other foundation subjects.

The timing is critical. The government intends to apply the revised Progress 8 accountability arrangements to pupils starting their GCSE courses in September 2027. Decisions being taken now about curriculum time and progression at KS3 will therefore directly affect outcomes under the future accountability framework.

5) Curriculum reform and legislative alignment

The Curriculum and Assessment Review recognises that the importance of RE is not reflected in its current standing and recommends work to place RE within the National Curriculum as a foundation subject. A sector-led Task and Finish Group is due to complete its work by March, paving the way for legislative change.

The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, due to be passed this spring, will require all schools to follow the National Curriculum, aligning curriculum entitlement, accountability and inspection expectations.

As RE moves towards inclusion in the National Curriculum as a foundation subject, schools that fail to make adequate provision — including those that flout the law, and provide no meaningful RE for pupils who do not opt for GCSE RS in Years 10 and 11 — are more likely to be exposed to challenge and scrutiny.

Conclusion

The combination of curriculum reform, accountability change and emerging legislation makes this an urgent leadership issue. Strengthening RE provision across all key stages is a forward-looking decision aligned with national policy direction, statutory expectations and pupil outcomes.

Endnotes

Ofsted (2024). Deep and meaningful? Religious Education subject report.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education>

Ofsted (2021). Religious education research review.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education>

NATRE. Reporting of written parliamentary question on GCSE Religious Studies and Progress 8 outcomes. <https://natre.org.uk>

Department for Education (2025). Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final report.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report>

Department for Education. Progress 8 and Attainment 8: proposed accountability reforms.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications>

UK Parliament. Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill. <https://bills.parliament.uk>