Guidance:
dealing with withdrawal from RE

NATRE
National Association of Teachers of Religious Education

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FOR LEADERS, FOR LEARNERS

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Introduction

This document provides guidance and support for head teachers, senior leaders and teachers of RE to manage the right of withdrawal in their school. Surveys and anecdotes suggest that more parents are exercising their right to withdraw their child from some or all of RE. In the 2018 NATRE primary survey, almost 16 per cent of the schools surveyed said they had some parents using the right of withdrawal.

Whilst withdrawing their children remains a right for parents, the law was not designed to be used in the way it is being used by some. This guide, produced by NATRE, clarifies the law and offers suggestions for dealing with specific withdrawal scenarios. For more information on RE in schools, go to www.natre.org.uk/about-re/

Naomi Anstice, Assistant Head Teacher, Frodsham Manor House Primary School

"I have found NATRE membership to be central to my understanding of RE in an ever-changing political climate. You are in touch with what is happening with your subject nationally as well as having plenty of resources support and opportunities to work within local networks to share and develop best practice. RE can be a tricky subject to navigate… the online help, excellent CPD and inspiring ideas from NATRE are invaluable."

English legislation

RE is for all pupils

- Every pupil has a legal entitlement to RE.
- RE is a necessary part of a 'broad and balanced curriculum' and must be provided for all registered pupils in state-funded schools in England, including those in the sixth form, unless withdrawn by their parents (or withdrawing themselves if they are aged 18 or over).[1]
- This requirement does not apply to pupils below compulsory school age (although there are many examples of good practice of RE in nursery classes).
- Special schools should ensure that every pupil receives RE 'as far as is practicable'.[2]
- The 'basic' school curriculum includes the National Curriculum, RE, and relationships and sex education.[3]

RE is locally determined, not nationally

- A locally agreed syllabus is a statutory syllabus for RE, recommended by a local standing advisory committee for RE (SACRE) for adoption by a local authority.[4]
- Maintained schools without a religious character must follow the locally agreed syllabus.
- Voluntary controlled schools with a religious character should follow the locally agreed syllabus unless parents request RE in accordance with the trust deed or religious designation of their school.
- Voluntary aided schools with a religious character should provide RE in accordance with the trust deed or religious designation of their school unless parents request the locally agreed syllabus. In many of these school types there will be an overarching body, such as a diocese, which can offer support.
- RE is compulsory for all pupils in academies and free schools as set out in their funding agreements. This is a contractual responsibility. Academies may use their locally agreed syllabus, a different locally agreed syllabus (with the permission of the SACRE concerned) or may devise their own curriculum.

RE is multifaith, and recognises the place of Christianity and the other principal religions in the UK. Non-religious worldviews are included

- The RE curriculum, drawn up by a SACRE or used by an academy or free school, 'shall reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain'.[5] Contemporary guidance from the Government makes clear that the breadth of RE will include the six principal religions of the UK and non-religious worldviews.

1 School Standards and Framework Act 1998, Schedule 19; Education Act 2002, section 80.
2 The Education (Special Educational Needs) (England) (Consolidation) (Amendment) Regulations 2006, Regulation 5A.
3 Relationships and sex education, and health education will both become compulsory from 2020.
4 Education Act 1996, Schedule 31.
5 Education Act 1996, section 375.

Parental right of withdrawal from RE

This was first granted in 1944 when curricular RE was called '*Religious Instruction*' and carried with it connotations of induction into the Christian faith. RE is very different now – open, broad and exploring a range of religious and non-religious worldviews. In the UK, parents still have the right to withdraw their children from RE on the grounds that they wish to provide their own RE. This provision will be the parents' responsibility.[6] This right of withdrawal exists for all pupils in all types of school, including schools with and without a religious designation. Students aged 18 or over have the right to withdraw themselves from RE. Parents also have the right to withdraw their child from part of RE, and can do so without giving any explanation.

Teachers also have the right to withdraw from the teaching of RE. However, this does not apply to teachers who have been specifically employed to teach or lead RE. If a teacher wishes to withdraw from the teaching of RE, a letter requesting this must be submitted to the head of the school and its chair of governors. If a teacher withdraws from the teaching of RE, the school must still make provisions for the pupils to receive their entitlement to RE.

Ten tips to manage the right of withdrawal in your school

1. Include a short statement about RE being inclusive in your prospectus and on your website. Inclusive RE is essential.
2. Give information about withdrawal on your website after positive explanations about what RE in your school is. Parents are often trying to withdraw from something you don't do.
3. Use parents' evenings, assemblies and displays to showcase what goes on in RE lessons and to promote religious literacy, cultural diversity and visits to places of worship.
4. Parents have a right of withdrawal from all of RE or part of RE. Some schools choose to state that they are not supportive of selective withdrawal from part of RE. This does not override a parental right to withdraw from part of RE – if requested, this partial withdrawal must be granted.
5. Ask parents considering withdrawal to contact the head teacher to arrange a discussion.
6. Ensure that parents who wish to withdraw their children are met with quickly.
7. Discuss the religious issues the parents would object to their child being taught about.
8. Show parents the kinds of things you do in RE by showing the locally agreed syllabus, aims of RE, learning objectives and examples of lessons.
9. If a parent has withdrawn their child from RE it is good practice to review this with the parent every year.
10. Parents can only withdraw their child from RE, not other curriculum areas. For example, pupils can't be withdrawn from a study of religious art in an art lesson, or parts of the history curriculum such as the study of Christian conversions.

'I enjoy learning about other religions because it's interesting and good to know about other religions because it will come in useful one day'

pupil, age 10

6 School Standards and Framework Act 1998 S71 (3).

Dealing with parental requests to withdraw from RE

When a request to withdraw is received by a school, the school should speak with the parent to try to understand the basis for the request. To avoid misunderstanding, the school should establish the religious issues about which the parent objects to their child being taught (all the while respecting the parent's right to withdraw their child without giving reasons). Once known, the school should discuss with the parent the practical implications of withdrawal and the circumstances in which it may be reasonable to accommodate their wishes. Practical examples of how a school may reassure a concerned parent who is considering withdrawing their child may include inviting the parent to observe a RE lesson, discussing curriculum documents and discussing the aims of RE in your school with them.

Below we have provided some examples of typical things you might hear from parents who would like to withdraw a pupil from RE, and some suggestions as to how you might want to frame a response. These would all need to be adapted to your school's own circumstances.

Where I went to school, RE taught us about our own religion. We don't have the same religion as you so it will be inappropriate for my child to do it.

'We respect the religious backgrounds of all our pupils. In RE we definitely teach about more than one religion, and non-religious worldviews too.'

When I did RE, all we did was listen to Bible stories. They're boring and completely irrelevant in today's world. I don't send my child to school for that.

'Our RE curriculum goes far beyond only listening to Bible stories, as you can see from these examples of pupils' work. Our teachers work hard to ensure that all our lessons are engaging for pupils, including RE.'

You teach all those other religions, but Christianity is never taught.

'Christianity is certainly included in RE lessons at this school. RE legally needs to reflect that fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions. Let me show you where Christianity is included in our long-term plan.'

'In RE I like it when we research looking in books to try and find something'
pupil, age 10

My child isn't going to visit a place of worship because …

'Have you ever visited a place of worship of this type? Why don't you come on the trip with your child? We've visited this place of worship successfully before, and it has been a really positive experience.'

It's not safe for my child to visit a mosque.

'Can you explain what makes you think this? I'm sure you know that we have to look very carefully at the sorts of places we visit, and I can assure you that your child will be safe. We would not be allowed to take our pupils on this trip otherwise. Why don't you come with the class on the trip?'

We don't need to visit any places of worship other than our own.

'Are there any particular concerns you have about visiting this place of worship? Our pupils are visiting the place of worship so that they can learn about it – it's much harder to learn about a place of worship without an actual visit. Your child won't be asked to join in with any acts of worship. We make it clear to pupils that they must tell us if there is anything they feel uncomfortable about, and we'll ensure that your child isn't put into a situation that you would be uncomfortable with either. Please do come along with the class to see what we do and why it's such a good experience.'

We have our own religion; my child doesn't need converting to any others.

'RE isn't about converting anyone. It involves learning academically about different religions and worldviews. Pupils are not encouraged or expected to change their own religion or worldview in any way.'

Our religion teaches the truth, and we need our child to learn that. S/he doesn't need to learn about religions that have got it wrong – it'll confuse him/her.

'We are teaching about religion as an academic subject. In RE, pupils are finding out about what different people believe and how they practise their religion. In their future lives, our pupils will all need to work and live alongside people from other religions, so it's essential that they know enough about other religions to do this successfully. We don't teach any religion as true or untrue. It is your absolute right to bring your child up following your religious tradition, but this religious nurture happens at home, not in RE lessons.'

You're telling me my child is struggling in English and maths. Surely they need more lessons in those subjects, not RE.

'It's important that pupils all have a broad and balanced curriculum, and it's only fair that they have opportunities to go beyond a narrow curriculum of only English and maths. Pupils' work across all subjects can support their literacy and numeracy skills, including RE. All pupils legally need to do RE.'

Religion is irrelevant in modern times. More and more people are non-religious. Why do they need to learn about religions in school?

'Although there is an increasing number of non-religious people in this country, this doesn't mean religion isn't relevant. You only have to watch the news and look at the media to see how often it's mentioned and the important part it plays in world events. It's essential that pupils understand both religious and non-religious worldviews, as this will enable them to understand more about the world around them and prepare them for their future role in society.'

'I enjoy RE because I enjoy learning about other religions. I mainly enjoy thinking about the differences between religions'

pupil, age 9

People from that religion are evil. I can't have my child learning about them.

'I'm very sorry, but you are wrong. I know of lots of people who belong to that religion who could in no way be described as "evil". RE lessons allow us to teach about people's beliefs and how that religion suggests they live their lives. I agree that everyone's capable of doing bad and good things whether or not they are religious or non-religious, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't learn about people's religions, or that everyone belonging to one religion should be described as "evil".'

Scenarios showing when pupils can and cannot be legally withdrawn from RE

Whilst parents have a clear legal right to withdraw their children from RE, and do not have to express their reason for the withdrawal, many parents share their reasons, and should be encouraged to do so. The following sample scenarios are ones in which pupils can be withdrawn, and following is a further set of scenarios where a pupil cannot be legitimately withdrawn. Please note neither of these lists is exhaustive.

'I know why we need to learn about religions – it tells us about beliefs and big ideas and when people do things. I don't always agree but that makes it interesting too.'
pupil, age 11

Sample scenarios where a pupil could be legally withdrawn from RE
After a long chat, the parents still insist they would like their child withdrawn from all RE. It has been clear during the conversation that the parents misunderstand what RE is. The school would still need to accept this request to withdraw.
A letter comes in from a parent explaining that she would like all three of her children withdrawn from any teaching about Islam in RE. She offers no reason and declines your offer to meet to discuss this. Her request must still be granted.
A parent who is a Jehovah's Witness explains that their child will not take part in any work around festivals, including learning about Christmas as the celebration of the birth of Jesus. The request must be granted regarding withdrawal from RE.
A parent writes to you explaining that their child will not be taking part in RE, as they believe all religion teaches untruth and they don't want their child to learn about that. The request must be granted regarding withdrawal from RE.

Sample scenarios where a pupil could NOT be legally withdrawn from RE
A pupil in Year 4 has been withdrawn from RE by her parents. The class is studying the Romans in their history lessons. The lessons include culture and belief and early Christianity in Britain. The pupil can be withdrawn specifically from RE lessons, but cannot be withdrawn from learning about religions in other lessons, so will continue to learn about Christianity in history lessons.
The best time for the phonics top-up teacher to take Year 2 is on Wednesday during the RE lesson. This is not a legitimate withdrawal from RE; only a parent can withdraw a pupil.
In English, you are teaching the opening scene with the Three Witches from *Macbeth*. A Christian parent asks for their child to be removed for as long as this text is being studied. This is not a legitimate withdrawal, so can be turned down.
A parent explains that in their religion singing and music are not allowed, so their child will not be taking part in music lessons. This is not a legitimate withdrawal, so can be turned down.

One of my pupils has been withdrawn from RE. What now?

If a pupil is withdrawn, the school has a duty of care to look after the pupil, but not to provide alternative education. Schools deal this with this in different ways, but any arrangements made must not incur extra cost for the school. Most commonly, pupils sit at the back of another classroom, in the library or at the back of the classroom reading a book whilst the RE lesson takes place. This time should not be used for other curriculum subject areas, e.g. extra maths or other lessons.

If the parents are withdrawing their child because they have an objection to the particular nature of the RE being taught, they are allowed to request an alternative religious education. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998, section 71, allows parents to arrange an alternative religious education for the pupil. If this happens, this must not disrupt the rest of the pupil's education or incur any extra cost for the school. For example, if a pupil attends a community school and wishes to receive a Catholic religious education, their parent could take them to a local Catholic primary school for RE lessons, but only if this is convenient, i.e. the pupil wouldn't miss other lessons. For more details on this, see p. 28 of *Religious education in English schools* (DCFS 2010): bit.ly/2v35joD

Alternatively, parents could send in RE materials for the pupil to work on during RE lessons. It should be noted that arranging an alternative religious education is extremely rare.

Case study A: withdrawal from place of worship visits

A school on the edge of a large multicultural city had lots of parents refuse to allow their children to go on trips to certain places of worship. The explanations for the refusals were varied. The first year that this happened the head teacher was determined that the trips would go ahead, so ran the trips even though a third of the pupils remained in school. The pupils who remained in school completed work on the relevant places of worship.

After discussion with the local SACRE and NATRE, the head ensured that information on RE and place of worship visits were shared with all new parents. Displays were arranged at parents' evenings and visitors from places of worship came to speak in RE lessons. At the beginning of the next school year, a blanket permission slip for all trips was sent out, ensuring that parents only needed to be informed that a trip was taking place. Parents were still informed of all trips taking place and could, of course, still withdraw their child if they wanted to. An additional amount of money was put into the RE budget to cover the cost of RE visits. Finally, parents, along with teaching assistants who lived in the local community, were asked to accompany the trips in the hope that an understanding of the purpose of the trips would be shared in playground conversations and informally around the community. This resulted in almost all pupils taking part in the place of worship visits.

Other schools in the area also invite speakers from places of worship; have stands showing photos of trips at parents' evenings; write positively about trips in newsletters and the local press; and pair trips to a place of worship with trips to a museum, or visit a church in the morning and a different place of worship in the afternoon.

Case study B: withdrawal by a particular community

A group of parents from the Jehovah's Witness community approached the local primary school their children attended to request that the children were withdrawn from RE. A meeting was set up between the head teacher and some representatives from the community. This meeting explained the aims and objectives of RE and the school's approach to the subject, and showed sample planning and the locally agreed syllabus. The group still chose to withdraw their children from some aspects of RE, such as learning about the celebration of Christmas, but there were many aspects of the RE curriculum that the parents and community members were happy for their children to take part in.

As a result of this meeting, further work was done in the local area with the Jehovah's Witness community on introducing teaching about their beliefs into RE (see: www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free%20Resources/Jehovahs_Witnesses.pdf).

What is NATRE and how can it help?

NATRE is the subject teacher association for RE professionals. It works to support those who teach and lead in all schools and institutions and at all stages of their career.

Our aim is simple: we want every pupil in the UK to have access to excellent RE to help build a broad and balanced curriculum.

We understand the complexities of your job and responsibilities, so we work to support you to fulfil your delivery of RE within your school's curriculum.

This is why we are giving all NAHT members an exclusive offer on the membership that will equip your senior leaders and teachers with high-quality resources and support.

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Gold NATRE membership will give you and your RE subject leader:

- a termly head teacher and governor briefing
- an RE policy exemplar document
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- a £100 discount on RE Today CPD training – we run many excellent courses to help increase RE subject knowledge and provide practical support, including 'Help! I'm an RE subject leader'
- a termly 32-page curriculum book from our primary 'Inspiring RE' series
- *REtoday* magazine, which is packed full of articles, classrooms activities and ideas, and also includes *Professional REflection*, which focuses on the pedagogical nature of the subject
- access to over 1,000 classroom resources online
- Local Groups to join and share learning and challenges

Get your 50% discount by signing up today! Give us the name of your RE subject leader to get high-quality resources going straight to their pigeonhole and inbox.

Kate Penfold-Attride, Deputy Head, St Matthew's CE Primary School, Redhill, Surrey

'As a senior leader our school NATRE membership helps in many ways. I find it a particularly useful way of keeping up to date with changes and new ideas that I can use in meetings with our RE Leader and in appraisal. Also, there are often resources or ideas in the RE Today publication we get with our membership … that guide what we should be looking for during learning walks. I have used NATRE resources when working with our RE Governor to develop our curriculum and organise RE days and Inset. It's invaluable to have high-quality resources readily available to help further develop this important subject in our school.'

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This offer is only available to NEW members who have not been a part of NATRE for more than 12 months.

Useful links and publications

Pages 27–30 of *Religious education in English schools: Non-statutory guidance 2010*: bit.ly/2v35joD

Advice on withdrawal from Cornwall SACRE: www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/3621681/Withdrawal-from-RE.pdf

Managing the Right of Withdrawal from RE by Gill Vaisey: www.booksatpress.co.uk/withdrawalguide19.html

Article on working with the Jehovah's Witness community: www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free%20Resources/Jehovahs_Witnesses.pdf

For more information on RE in schools: www.natre.org.uk/about-re/about-re/

'I like RE because you can answer lots of questions and talk to people about your religion and show that you are proud of your religion'

pupil, age 10