



Religion Teachers' Association of Ireland

www.rtai.ie Email: info@rtai.ie

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Dear Minister Bruton,

The Religion Teachers' Association of Ireland (RTAI) is the recognised subject association for teachers of Religious Education in post-primary schools. We are writing to you as Minister for Education and Skills to highlight the concerns expressed by our members in recent days regarding the status of Religious Education in light of Circular 0013/2018.

We are dismayed that the circular continuously refers, in the most part, to 'religious instruction' rather than 'Religious Education' without clarifying either and without differentiating between the two. The short paragraph, Paragraph 5, which does mention Religious Education, is misleading and ungenerous. Religious instruction is a term used in Ireland to indicate instruction in accordance with the rites, practice and teaching of a particular religion or denomination for pupils of that faith tradition. Religious Education as a subject in post-primary schools is open to all pupils regardless of their commitment to any particular religion or worldview, and seeks to contribute to the spiritual and moral development of all students. The language used in the circular only serves to perpetuate misconceptions about the teaching of Religious Education in Ireland today.

As you are aware, the Department itself has issued a Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (2000), setting out the rationale for Religious Education and is in the process of devising a new Religious Education specification, along with new specifications for other subjects, written in accordance with the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015). There is also a Leaving Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (2003), as well as Department Guidelines for the implementation of both in schools. Specifically, the Department states: 'Religious Education should ensure that students are exposed to a broad range of religious traditions and to the non-religious interpretation of life... It seeks to develop in students the skills needed to engage in meaningful dialogue with those of other, or of no, religious tradition.' (JCRES, p.4).

By failing to acknowledge and own these syllabi you have caused a great deal of confusion and have put yourself in the position, possibly unintentionally, of undermining twenty years of excellent progressive work by religion teachers, principals and boards of management, across all the post-primary school sectors.

It is essential, of course, that parents have the right to request that their son or daughter not participate in Religious Education, if that is their wish, but the negative tone of Circular 0013/2018 and the failure to state positively the opportunity offered by Religious Education for students to learn together about religious and other worldviews, debate these questions openly in class, grow in confidence in discussing the search for meaning and values, and prepare to be responsible citizens of Ireland in a contemporary, respectful and generous manner, is not only a lost opportunity but inexcusable.

In our opinion the following points need to be highlighted:

- Religious Education, as both an exam and non-exam subject, has contributed significantly to the holistic education of students in Ireland. It fosters all of the eight key skills identified in the Framework for Junior Cycle, as underpinning successful learning.
- Religious Education plays a central role in bringing the mission statement of a school to life as it underpins the ethos and values of a school community and brings those commitments to life in the classroom and beyond.
- The Education Act states that we must promote the spiritual and moral dimension of the student. This is the promise of holistic education – a promise to which Religious Education contributes uniquely. It is hard to see how some of the twenty four statements of learning identified in the Framework for Junior Cycle, can be achieved without appropriate time being given to Religious Education.
- Religious Education has developed at second level in such a way that it can be open to all participants, contributing to the spiritual and moral development of students whatever their belief system, religious or secular. Depending on its ethos system and participating students, the Religious Education Department in each school should be encouraged to develop an appropriate approach to Religious Education for that school.
- Religious Education promotes personal reflection, ecumenical engagement, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, and ecological education. It provides a framework for the work of social justice within schools.
- Religious Education affords students the opportunity to engage with religious traditions and secular worldviews apart from their own, allowing them to develop the skills and attitudes they need to engage positively, respectfully and constructively in a pluralist society.
- Religious Education provides students with time and space for their own spiritual reflection and religious development and allows them to consider the religious viewpoint as a legitimate way of reading and responding to the world.
- Religious Education promotes social cohesion, allowing students to be educated together regarding matters of faith and belief, encouraging tolerance and acceptance.

Other European countries, and many further afield, have heightened their awareness of the need for religious education in light of, for example, 9/11 and the turmoil created by radicalisation of some young people by those with fundamentalist worldviews, ethnic cleansing, the middle-eastern refugee crisis, and the growing pressures on the environment.

We feel that in responding to one agenda you have forgotten to support the hard work being done by Religious Education teachers in all schools across the country to prepare young people for the world of today. We are of the opinion that Ireland requires young people who are informed and prepared to contribute actively to the development of an ever more aware and ethically responsible society and that Religious Education has a unique contribution to make.

Parents have the right to be properly informed about decisions they make with regard to the fullest possible education of their young people. They have the right to expect that schools would 'promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students' as laid down in law (Education Act, 1998, 9.d). The misinformation you have published in Circular 0013/2018, seeming to equate Religious Education with religious instruction in a particular faith, and the mechanism you have sought to put in place in some schools, may result in students no longer participating in Religious Education on the basis of this misrepresentation. It will also compromise the efforts these schools make in providing for the fullest possible holistic education of their students

The RTAI would like to take this opportunity to thank school principals, teachers, parents and students for their commitment to Religious Education and in particular to commend our own members for the enormous efforts they make every day to engage their pupils in this dynamic, modern and critically reflective subject.

As committed and concerned teachers, we trust that you, as Minister, will carefully reconsider your position on the vital role of Religious Education in ensuring a holistic, inclusive and sustainable curriculum for all our students, now and for generations to come. With this in mind we urge you to correct the mistaken impression given by Circular 0013/2018, either by withdrawing it in its present form to allow you to have it redrafted, or by issuing a further circular immediately on Religious Education, correcting the unfortunate impression you have given of your and the Department's position in regard to the subject.

We await your earliest possible response.

Valerie Roe (Chairperson)

For and on behalf of the executive and members of the RTAI
info@rtai.ie