

Religious Education Council of England & Wales Annual Conference - 07 May 2014 - Pierhead Building, Cardiff Bay

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today at the Religious Education Council of England and Wales Annual Conference.

I am delighted to welcome your Conference to Cardiff this year at a time of such significant change in the Welsh education.

It is these changes that I want to speak to you about today.

How we are improving our schools in Wales.

How we are raising the standard of literacy and numeracy of all pupils, and lifting the educational attainment of pupils from deprived backgrounds.

I want to then go on to discuss how I see Religious Education as part of this reform programme.

I want to then finish by touching briefly on the future of Education here in Wales.

Let's begin with school improvement.

I believe that we are making progress on our school improvement agenda.

Some of it – on the Literacy and Numeracy Framework for example – is genuinely ground-breaking and worthy of celebration.

In other related areas - like the day-to-day teaching of maths - I know that progress is too slow.

Too patchy.

In order for Wales to develop the world class education system we all want to see, our goal must be to extend the **best** that is possible to **all** pupils in **all** schools.

Equality must be at the heart of everything we do.

This of course has to start in our schools.

There is a myriad of ways that schools can achieve this, particularly through the statutory curriculum and in extra-curricula activities.

Our National Model for Regional Working will be a key driver as we continue to raise standards and performance in schools across Wales.

However, it is important to recognise that some schools face unique challenges requiring specialised, additional support.

This is why I recently announced Schools Challenge Cymru.

This is our flagship improvement programme aimed at increasing performance in Welsh schools and focusing support on schools that are facing the biggest challenges of circumstances and delivery.

To help achieve this I have now launched a UK wide recruitment campaign to identify School Challenge Cymru Advisers to ensure we get the best candidates who have a proven record in transforming education for children and young people.

These Advisers will work with Regional Consortia and schools to drive our school important work forward in these 40 schools.

To ensure the success of Schools Challenge Cymru I have committed up to £20m, alongside proven expertise, to deliver a package of support that is individually tailored to meet each of the school's needs.

40 secondary schools in Wales, and their cluster primaries, have been selected to be part of this exciting new programme – a model of improvement that we **know** is proven to work.

The programme will be designed to tap into the potential of each school and help **support** the leadership and the workforce at each school to drive **their own** swift and sustainable improvements for the young people at their schools.

Our focus will be on embedding change within each school and indeed throughout the system to ensure long term benefits to leadership, teaching, and learning.

In so doing, I want to **empower** these schools to punch above their weight, to overcome their circumstances – and to set and achieve higher standards for all their learners.

While the focus will be on driving improvements for the participant schools, I fully expect Schools Challenge Cymru to be the catalyst for wider, system wide change.

Using the principles of the National Model, Schools Challenge Cymru will make full use of some of Wales' finest and highest performing schools.

They will share expertise and leadership directly into the classroom, supporting teachers to achieve the improvements we seek.

We must ensure that **sharing ideas** becomes the dominant culture in Welsh education.

Building on this, on the 9th of April, I announced that Professor Mel Ainscow would act as our Schools Challenge Cymru Champion.

Some of you will know that Mel was Chief Adviser for the Greater Manchester Challenge between 2007 and 2011 and with his understanding of the Welsh education landscape, Mel is a superb ambassador and champion for the programme here in Wales.

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Of course in addition to this we will also be building on the major changes we have already started.

Our basic skills agenda is critical and we are continuing our work to make literacy and numeracy relevant for all our young people.

I am sure you will agree the application of numeracy in the real world is critical.

Educationalists and employers have a vital role in delivering the changes we need to see.

That is why we have launched the Numeracy Employer Engagement Programme here in Wales.

This scheme encourages employers to work **with** schools and to show how numeracy can be used in real life contexts.

It also highlights the core value and the importance of having strong numeracy skills in the future.

A year ago we introduced statutory National Reading and Numeracy Tests for learners in years 2 to 9.

This year we introduced a reasoning element to the numeracy tests.

We have produced a full package of support for the development of numerical reasoning skills, including sample materials, in addition to other support and guidance.

We are continuing our financial commitment to our improvement agenda through the School Effectiveness Grant and the Pupil Deprivation Grant.

More than one hundred million pounds will be available this year to schools and local education consortia to implement interventions that will address our priorities.

The School Effectiveness Grant is supporting measures to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and to raise literacy and numeracy levels.

Through it we are delivering training for practitioners in all aspects of literacy and numeracy.

There is also provision for additional activities such as catch-up lessons for pupils who have fallen behind and measures to challenge more able and talented pupils.

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The work we are doing through our Pupil Deprivation Grant is critical to my other key priority of breaking the link between educational attainment and poverty.

It is aimed squarely at raising the attainment of pupils from deprived backgrounds and complements the activities we fund through the School Effectiveness Grant.

Through it we are encouraging teachers to raise expectations for children, parents and carers from deprived backgrounds and to help their young people overcome the barriers to learning that they encounter.

This work is also supported through our Family Learning Programme grant.

This enables local authorities to offer a range of provision, targeted predominantly at areas of greatest disadvantage, to help parents learn alongside their young children, with mutual benefits in the development of literacy and numeracy skills.

The literacy and numeracy agenda is bolstered through programmes of work delivered by Booktrust Cymru and the Welsh Books Council, supported with Welsh Government funding.

And we also recognise the need to tackle the gender gap at a national level.

A new initiative, called 'Premier League Reading Stars Cymru' is being developed in partnership with the National Literacy Trust and the Premier League, to support the boys' literacy agenda.

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Now, this leads me on to looking at how the teaching of Religious Education fits in to the changing educational landscape here in Wales.

Religious Education teachers are already introducing and implementing the Literacy and Numeracy Framework in their lessons.

We have seen some excellent practice across Wales.

The Welsh Government takes religion and the teaching of Religious Education in society very seriously.

Since devolution, there have been many examples of this, from the setting up of the First Minister's Faith Forum and the publication of the Welsh Government's *Faith in Education*, strategy to the full inclusion of Religious Education in the first curriculum review in 2008.

Religious education makes a distinctive contribution to a balanced and broad-based school curriculum.

We live in a society that is more culturally diverse than at any time in its history, so there has never been a greater need for high quality Religious Education in our schools.

RE promotes the spiritual, moral, social, cultural, mental and the physical development of pupils in our society.

It prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.

The subject contributes to pupils' well-being and to community cohesion, by promoting mutual respect and tolerance in the diverse society that is Wales today.

As a Welsh Government we welcomed the Estyn report on Religious Education in June last year which was broadly positive.

Estyn reported that more pupils gain a qualification in religious studies than in any other non-core subject in Wales.

In 2011, over 28,000 pupils gained either a full-course or short-course GCSE in religious studies.

This is out of around 36,000 pupils who entered GCSEs that year.

In fact the number of entries for full GCSE courses in religious studies has risen by a third in Wales over the last 5 years.

In 2012 over a quarter of all year 11 pupils were entered for the full course and, of the non-core subjects - only history had more entries.

By comparison, in 2008, many more subjects had significantly more entries than Religious Studies - subjects such as French, Art and Design, Geography, History and ICT for example.

So, RE is not only important, it is increasing in popularity by pupils wish to follow the subject to GCSE level.

However, Estyn did raise some issues and it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure that *all* children and young people benefit from the good quality Religious provision which already exists in many schools in Wales.

For example, schools do need to develop strategies to raise the attainment of boys at Key Stage 4.

They need to improve the standards for pupils who are not entered at all for a qualification.

They also need to ensure that tasks are challenging enough to enable more able pupils to reach higher levels at Key Stage 3.

To do this we will continue to share good practice in relation to professional development opportunities for teachers of religious education.

We will also continue to engage with key partners in assessing the quality of support provided by local authorities and consortia to religious education in schools.

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Finally, I would like to give you a brief update on the review of the curriculum that is currently taking place in Wales.

We are currently consulting on proposed Areas of Learning and Programmes of Study for Maths, English and Welsh first language.

We want stakeholder views on whether the expectations for what children should know and be able to accomplish, are sufficiently

demanding and challenging and in line with the expectations of the Literacy and Numeracy Framework.

Looking at the bigger picture, I recently announced the appointment of Professor Graham Donaldson to lead a wide ranging and independent review of the national curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales.

Professor Donaldson's review encompasses the Basic Curriculum, which includes Religious Education.

This review gives us a real opportunity to develop a curriculum in Wales which gives every child the best possible chance to go out and succeed as citizens of the world.

Professor Donaldson has signalled that engagement and importantly listening are at the heart of his review.

He is keen to actively engage and work closely with a wide range of stakeholders – including those with an interest in this important agenda.

Professor Donaldson is, and will be providing opportunities for all interested parties to contribute to this review and I would urge you to participate fully in shaping our 'Curriculum for Wales'.

I very much look forward to receiving Professor Donaldson's report and recommendations at the turn of this year.

So – to conclude.

There is no doubt that in Wales we are moving in the right direction but we still have some way to go.

We all want a world class education system here in Wales, but we will have to work to achieve.

It will mean us working harder.

Working smarter.

But importantly, it will mean us working together.

Let's continue that work.

Thank you.