

**DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT, TEACHER EDUCATION AND
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

Raymond Caldwell



Rathgael House
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22 September 2023

Dear Principal

**RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION (RSE) – MISINFORMATION
CAMPAIGN**

I wrote previously to you on 7 August and 1 September about a campaign that is circulating to parents/carers in relation to RSE. Since then, there has been ongoing activity on social media and public demonstrations against the teaching of RSE in schools, resulting in the circulation of misinformation. This campaign is clearly upsetting for parents and carers and does a disservice to the thousands of teachers who work hard every day to deliver a quality education for all our children and young people, including teaching them about RSE.

The protests appear to stem from a misperception that the recent changes to the statutory curriculum at Key Stages (KS) 3 and 4 signal a wider redrafting of the RSE curriculum which, it is claimed, has the potential to harm children and young people particularly those in primary schools. This is clearly not the case, as I have previously outlined, but will do so again for clarity.

The change to legislation brought in by the Secretary of State from 1 July 2023 **does not apply to primary schools**. It applies only to specific elements of the RSE curriculum at KS3 and KS4 in post-primary schools, namely that:

“The curriculum for every grant-aided school shall, in relation to key stages 3 and 4, include age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.”

The Regulations also require the Department to make provision for, at the request of a parent/carer of a pupil in KS3 and KS4 to be excused from [RSE] education that contain age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion or an element of it (as may be determined by the Department).

The Department launched a 12-week consultation on this aspect of the changes on 1 September 2023 which will run to 24 November. I want to re-emphasise that the consultation relates only to the circumstances in which a parent/carers can request to have their child excused from the specific aspect(s) of RSE associated with the change in legislation.

A copy of the consultation can be downloaded or completed online via [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) Consultation | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://education-ni.gov.uk/Relationships-and-Sexuality-Education-(RSE)-Consultation) I would be grateful if you would share this with parents/carers and pupils and encourage them to take the opportunity to give their views to inform the Department in finalising the regulations it is required to make and in developing guidance.

In order to address the concerns of parents/carers, the Department will be communicating to them through an information leaflet and using social media. We have developed the attached information for parents/carers which includes Frequently Asked Questions; this will be kept under review and updated as required. I would also be grateful if you could share this information with parents/carers. This information is also available at [RSE | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://education-ni.gov.uk/RSE).

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Caldwell', with a stylized flourish at the end.

RAYMOND CALDWELL

Director of Curriculum, Assessment, Teacher Education and Professional Learning



RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION (RSE)

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

Introduction

The Department wishes to provide information to parents/carers in relation to RSE, especially following the legislative changes made to the curriculum by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which came into force on 1 July. It also includes Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) to help reassure parents/carers about what is being taught in our schools.

Current position in schools

The Department requires all grant-aided schools to have an RSE policy and taught RSE programme. It is a matter for individual schools to decide who will deliver their RSE programme and how it will be delivered. **This has not changed.**

In keeping with the design principles of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, schools have flexibility to decide on the content of their taught RSE programme and how to deliver it. Typically, primary schools will deliver their RSE programme through Personal Development and Mutual Understanding lessons or through other lessons across the curriculum. At post-primary, schools will deliver their RSE programme through stand-alone Personal Development as part of Learning for Life and Work lessons, through other lessons across the curriculum or through a combination of both. Some schools also choose to use external providers to help support the delivery of aspects of their RSE programme.

Legislative change

The change to legislation means that the curriculum for every grant-aided school will, in relation to Key Stages 3 and 4, include age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion. The changes have been made to the curriculum for Learning for Life and Work in post-primary only. There are no changes in primary or to RSE more generally.

The Department is currently consulting on proposed regulations which will specify the circumstances in which you can ask to have your child excused from age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to

abortion or an element of it (as determined by the Department). The consultation ends on 24 November 2023. A link to the consultation can be found at [Consultation on Relationships and Sexuality Education | Department of Education](#). The Department would encourage you, as parents/carers, and young people to respond to the four statements in the Consultation.

What is RSE?

Relationships and Sexuality Education is about more than simply educating children about what is often inaccurately referred to as 'sex education'. Effective RSE is essential if children and young people are to value themselves and others as individuals and are to make responsible and well-informed decisions about their lives.

RSE in primary schools should provide children with opportunities to:

- value themselves as unique individuals;
- respect themselves and others;
- begin to develop their own moral thinking and value systems;
- learn about friendships, healthy relationships and behaviours with others;
- recognise and communicate their feelings and emotions and those of others;
- learn about the changes that occur as they progress towards adolescence, particularly the emotional and physical changes at puberty; and
- learn about keeping themselves safe and know what to do or who to go to if they feel unsafe.

Relationships and Sexuality Education is most effective when it is taught in a sensitive and inclusive manner, and in a way that is appropriate to the child's emotional and physical age and stage of development. All children have the right to quality teaching and learning across the curriculum; RSE is no exception. An absence of such provision may leave children with a learning and skills deficit, making them vulnerable and more susceptible to inappropriate behaviours including sexual abuse and exploitation.

Why is RSE important?

RSE is important because it:

- respects the rights of children;
- promotes a better understanding of diversity and inclusion;
- helps children to keep themselves safer in the digital world;
- provides reliable, accurate and timely age-appropriate information;
- promotes the use of appropriate language; and
- helps children to recognise inappropriate behaviour and touch.

Support for schools

Your child's school may already be addressing the new elements introduced by the Secretary of State through its taught RSE programme. However, there is no expectation on schools to do so ahead of the Department issuing guidance accompanied by support materials produced by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) by 1 January 2024 as required by this legislative change.

Information about what support materials are already available to schools may be found on the CCEA Hub at [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) | CCEA](#)

Department of Education
September 2023

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

Please note that the consultation is currently live and will not end until 24 November after which the Department will bring forward regulations and guidance. These FAQs will be kept under review and updated as required.

Q. Will my primary school child be taught about prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion?

No. The changes made by the Secretary of State only apply to pupils at Key Stages (KS) 3 and 4 (ages 11-16).

Q. It has been reported that the Secretary of State has brought in an entirely new RSE curriculum. Is this correct?

No. The only change to the curriculum is the addition of age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion at KS 3 and KS4 in post-primary.

Any further changes to the statutory curriculum would be a matter for a future Education Minister.

Q. Will my primary school child be taught about sexual reproduction?

RSE in primary schools focuses mainly on developing and maintaining healthy and happy relationships, including respect for themselves and others.

As they progress through each Key Stage, sexual reproduction is taught in an age-appropriate way. For example, children begin to learn how the body changes as they reach puberty.

If you have specific concerns about the content of the RSE programme in your child's primary school, you should speak to your child's teacher in the first instance.

Q. Some of the leaflets I have seen claim that children as young as four will be taught to perform certain sexual acts. Is this true?

No. This is inaccurate. Parents can view the content of CCEA's RSE progression framework for primary schools [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) | CCEA](#)

RSE in primary schools focuses mainly on developing and maintaining healthy and happy relationships, including respect for themselves and others.

Q. I've read that RSE is designed to sexualise young people from a very young age. Is this true?

No. RSE is a lifelong process, encompassing: the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills; and the development of attitudes, beliefs and values about relationships and sexuality.

Parents can view the content of CCEA's RSE progression framework for primary schools at [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) | CCEA](#).

Q. How will I know if I want to have my child excused from the teaching of these new topics at post-primary?

The Department requires post-primary schools to consult with parents/carers when developing and reviewing their RSE policy. The RSE policy and overview of their planned teaching programme should be made available to parents/carers.

This will provide you with the information you need to make this decision.

Q. Will I have to tell the school my reasons for asking for my child to be removed?

While the regulations have not been drafted yet, as the consultation is still open; it is anticipated that parents/carers will not have to give a reason for withdrawing their child from these specific classes.

Q. What does scientifically accurate mean?

Scientifically accurate means based on facts and evidence.

The Department has asked the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to produce support material for schools which will draw on a broad range of local and international scientific evidence.

This will include information from appropriate organisations including Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland.

Q. What happens if I want my child to receive education on access to abortion, but my child does not?

There is no statutory right for a child to request that they be withdrawn from any RSE lesson.

Where a young person does not wish to participate in these lessons, you may wish to liaise with the school in the first instance to clarify what will be taught and how.

Q. Where can I get more information about what is taught in RSE?

Your primary source of information should always be the school your child is attending.

Parents can view the content of CCEA's RSE progression framework for primary schools at [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) | CCEA](#).

Q. Does my child's school have an RSE policy?

All grant-aided schools are currently required to have a RSE policy based on the ethos of their school, subject to consultation with parents/carers and pupils. This should be kept under review to inform their taught RSE programme.

RSE forms a statutory component of the following key areas of learning, as set out in the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007:

- Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) in the primary curriculum;
- Personal Development and Home Economics statements of requirement for KS3; and
- Personal Development strand of Learning for Life and Work (LLW) at KS4.