

Leadership from primary school Head Teacher results in an effective new RSE programme

Understanding the need

Like many primary schools, RSE at Christ the King Catholic Primary School in Bristol had previously involved only a talk on puberty for girls and boys in Year 6. As the Head Teacher got to know the pupils and local community it became clear that this was not enough. Ward level data showed hard facts about the high level of teenage conception rates and domestic violence; whilst comments made by the older boys suggested that they had seen pornography and were confused by it.

Confidence about what needed doing

The Head Teacher, along with a learning mentor with a particular interest in RSE, decided to attend training provided by the local authority RSE advisors. The training event proved informative by providing national and international evidence that good quality RSE in primary school does not encourage children to have sex and in fact contributes to a reduction in unplanned teenage pregnancies. This gave the Head confidence to instigate the development of a full programme of RSE at Christ the King that would give pupils the knowledge and skills needed to navigate themselves safely around relationships and unwanted sexual contact.

The Head Teacher asked the learning mentor to lead on writing the new RSE programme. Materials and resources suggested by the local authority RSE advisor provided a starting point and a whole school programme was written for reception through to Year 6 with a focus on relationships. It includes age-appropriate information about naming body parts in Year 2, covers how babies are made and born in Year 4, and explores puberty in more depth in Year 6.

Support from Governors and local community

The Head Teacher's next step was to gain support from governors, including the vice-chair, who is also the Parish Priest. This was of particular importance as Christ the Church is a catholic school. The priest was supportive of the proposal, recognising that the school must teach what they needed to teach in order to support its pupils, and that the RSE programme should run alongside a Religious Education programme, with both being taught well and complimenting each other; supporting children in navigating their way around relationships. As the vice-chair, the Parish Priest offered further support by clarifying that the school shouldn't look to leave RSE out because it is a faith school, as it's an integral part of life.

Supporting staff

A series of events were planned by the Head Teacher to introduce the new programme to staff. The local authority advisor attended the first meeting and presented evidence regarding the effectiveness of RSE. In response to mixed feelings held by staff, a confidential staff questionnaire was organised alongside a circle time style meeting. This was led by the Head Teacher focusing on personal experiences of RSE and what staff wanted for pupils at the school. This helped to acknowledge personal barriers and create a shared desire to do a better job in preparing today's children for growing up. With increasing support for the new programme, staff attended one-to-one meetings to go through session plans and the learning mentor offered opportunities for the staff to shadow lessons in action. This resulted in staff being able to create a safe learning environment for themselves and the children so they could deliver the programme confidently.



Communications with parents/carers

Parents/carers were informed about the new RSE programme gradually over a period of weeks and months. Initially parents/carers received messages such as 'look out for information about the new RSE programme in the next newsletter'. Later parents/carers were invited to a meeting and the high turnout (45 parents and carers) reflected the genuine interest in the new programme and also concerns about the topic. Many parents/carers acknowledged that they were struggling to talk to their children about relationships, sex, and growing up at home but also feared talking about it would encourage their children to experiment. The meeting continued until all questions had been answered and some parents/carers took up the offer of a one-to-one meeting with the learning mentor to address any concerns privately. This supportive process resulted in no parents/carers withdrawing their children from the programme. A follow up conversation with a parent revealed that she was happy that the school were teaching the programme and that now, when her son talked to her, she did not become embarrassed because she knew that he had been receiving lessons from the school and was prepared for his questions.

How did the Head Teachers' leadership style facilitate this?

- The Head Teacher developed a clear vision for a new programme of RSE based on pupil need and international evidence.
- The role of RSE in supporting a strong school ethos of respect and compassion was integral to the Head Teacher's motivation and approach and was supported by the local faith leader.
- The Head Teacher gave a clear and direct message to staff, parents/carers and governors that the new programme would be implemented and that everyone would be supported.
- Communications with parents/carers and staff were well paced giving everyone time for reflection and one-to-one discussion and support.
- Tasks involved in implementing the programme were appropriately delegated; a learning mentor with particular interest and experience took a leading role with support from the Head Teacher, and expert advice on evidence and resources was sought and made available by the local authority RSE advisor.

The results

With the support of parents/carers, staff and governors the programme runs every year as an intensive RSE week in the summer term and is backed up by the broader PSHE programme. The RSE programme is part of a whole-school approach which promotes a consistent set of values, such as rights, compassion, reverence, respect, empathy and collective responsibility.

A cohort of pupils is now 'graduating' from the school, having experienced at least three years of the programme. Staff have observed that by Year 6, pupils can talk much more accurately and sensibly about sex and relationships issues because they build on learning received in the earlier years. They can describe that there are many kinds of feelings and different kinds of emotions and as a result can understand each other better. One child commented that 'It helps you get on together'. The results of this are illustrated by their reputation; pupils at Christ the King are known for their exemplary respectful behaviour by the local community.

Their achievements have also been recognised by Ofsted who rated both 'pupil behaviour' and 'the extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development' as outstanding in their 2009 report, and has resulted in attainment at the school gradually improving.

