

A broad and balanced education

Gillian Allcroft looks at governors' key role in the wider curriculum

Personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and sex and relationships education (SRE) have been the focus of a considerable amount of attention in the last few years. The PSHE Association defines PSHE as education which “deals with real life issues which affect children and young people, their families and their communities. It engages with the social, health and economic realities of their lives, their experiences and their attitudes.”

Prepared for life

NGA knows from what our members say at conferences and meetings and in responses to surveys that governors think it important that young people leave school not just with the appropriate academic standards, but prepared for the next stage of education or for life after school. Governors value the non-academic part of the curriculum.

NGA thinks both these subjects should be statutory and last month the House of Commons education select committee agreed with us. Following an inquiry, in which many organisations and individuals submitted written evidence and a selection, including NGA, were invited to give oral evidence, it published its report *Life lessons: PSHE and SRE in schools*.

In relation to sex and relationships education the report made two key

recommendations: it should be statutory and should be renamed relationships and sex education. NGA supports this latter recommendation. This might seem a bit like re-arranging deckchairs on the Titanic, but that one little word ‘sex’ gets the lion’s share of the attention, when in fact by far the most important aspect of SRE or RSE (as I will now refer to it) is relationships.

“The governing board has responsibilities to both its staff and its students”

Currently RSE is compulsory in maintained secondary education, but in maintained primary schools (outside any aspects of reproduction taught in national curriculum science) the governing body has to decide both whether it is taught and what is taught. NGA’s view has long been that this is not a decision which should reside with governors. Academies are required to provide a broad and

balanced curriculum and have regard to any guidance the secretary of state publishes in relation to RSE.

RSE and specifically the ‘sex’ aspect raise strong feelings, sometimes generated by a school making an error of judgment and using age inappropriate material. This may come down to a simple issue of training – did the person buying the resources have sufficient knowledge of the subject to purchase the right materials? However, in general, surveys show that the majority of parents do want schools to teach RSE, seeing this as a joint responsibility between parents and the school.

There are a small minority of parents who think this responsibility should reside solely with them and the law allows for these parents to withdraw their children from RSE outside national curriculum science; the select committee recommended that this right remain.

Mumsnet have told us that the poor quality of RSE is the most talked about schools issue by parents on their network. Perhaps governors need to be asking more questions about this provision.

But RSE is not the whole of a good PSHE curriculum. As Nicky Morgan,

QUESTIONS FOR GOVERNORS TO ASK

- Is PSHE an integral part of the curriculum in our school?
- Do we ensure that all staff delivering PSHE have received adequate training?
- What reports does the governing board receive about PSHE?
- How do we measure those things which are difficult to measure?

secretary of state for education, said in a speech in March to Bright Blue (a right leaning think tank): “A good PSHE education should cover all of the skills and knowledge young people need to manage their lives, stay safe, make the right decisions, and thrive as individuals and members of modern society.”

And although she didn't support the need for statutory PSHE she was very clear that both PSHE and RSE are important. In the same speech she said: “...it's this focus on the whole child that leads me to believe

its students – asking inadequately trained staff to deliver PSHE is detrimental to both. This is particularly, but not exclusively, true of RSE teaching. Some schools invite external bodies in to talk about particularly sensitive areas and these sessions can be very valuable, but they need to be balanced. The organisations carrying out such sessions often come at the issue from a particular perspective and schools need to ensure that a balanced view is given – even in schools with a religious character.

“The majority of parents do want schools to teach RSE”

that personal, social, health and economic education – or PSHE – is an important part of a school's offer too.”

She went on to say that the government would work with the PSHE Association to develop a charter mark for schools that demonstrate excellence in PSHE teaching.

What does PSHE cover?

PSHE should encompass a whole range of life skills including: healthy eating; mental and emotional health; drug, alcohol and tobacco education; personal finance, savings, debt and budgeting; personal risk including internet safety; career choices; managing change and adversity; and resilience.

In all schools the governing board's function is to ensure that PSHE is being taught as a separate subject, as well as integrated into the wider curriculum. With the pressure to look good in the performance tables ever greater there can be a temptation to devote less time to 'non-examination' subjects such as PSHE. Governing boards have a really important role to play in supporting the headteacher to continue to allocate quality time in the school day to these subjects.

Secondly, governing boards should ask who is teaching PSHE and what training they have had to deliver it effectively. The governing board has responsibilities to both its staff and

Many schools either take part in or run their own surveys of young people and these can be both illuminating and scary. For example, Facebook has a 'threshold of age 13' for an account but very many primary school pupils have their own pages – often with the full knowledge of their parents. Over the last few years more attention has been paid to privacy settings and how to manage accounts online but youngsters can still be incredibly vulnerable simply because they behave in the manner we would want children of their age to behave, like children. Many schools now also offer parental internet safety sessions which can be extremely valuable. I have yet to find a parent who hasn't found out at least something they didn't know.

'Character education' is discussed on page 38 and building that ability to manage and have resilience is vital to young people's future life. Building resilience is important for all young people, but it won't prevent the serious mental health issues that some will suffer. Young people's mental health is a growing problem and we know that access to support services is increasingly difficult – but part of PSHE should be providing knowledge of the support services that do exist.

Careers education remains an area for improvement. We can start in

GENERAL SAFETY EDUCATION

RoSPA (the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents) is perhaps understandably unhappy that the inquiry focused almost entirely on RSE and didn't make much comment, or any recommendations about general safety education. RoSPA's approach is very much based on teaching children and young people about how to assess and manage risks. In relation to governing board responsibilities some of you may also have come across the RoSPA Blue Book aimed at schools and their health and safety responsibilities. <http://www.rosipa.com/schoolandcollegesafety/info/managing-safety-schools-colleges.pdf>

primary schools by lifting children's eyes to the possibilities that exist – you can be a female welder or engineer and equally a male beautician or head of early years. As governing boards we need to ensure our youngsters are getting the best advice we can offer at age 15-16 – while financially we might want young people to stay on in our school the most important thing is that the young person receives tailored advice and possibly the school down the road, or the FE college, is better suited to that young person.

Governing boards have a responsibility for promoting wellbeing – so how do we measure that and should we? We should assess how well as a school we promote wellbeing, but there are various ways we can do that which don't rely on percentages and hard targets. The Framework for Governance in the guidance centre gives some pointers.

Not all this needs to be done through dedicated PSHE lessons,



but governing boards do need to ensure that it is happening. ☒

Gillian Allcroft is NGA policy manager