Ten ways governors can help RE

Lat Blaylock, Editor of REToday, writes here an article that you might like to copy to your governors.

If governors want better RE in their school, then here are ten questions to think about at school leadership level.

1. Is our school already good at RE, or does the subject come tenth out of ten for our teachers?
   - Primary RE is a mixed bag across the country. Good schools give it a fair budget, time slot and priority, and all classes learn how to understand religions and beliefs, how to disagree respectfully and how to express their own beliefs and values with increasing clarity. But in bad RE there is little or no time, money or interest. Children keep on making Diwali cards and hearing about a Good Samaritan, but make poor progress. Ask: where are we on the spectrum of provision? How would we know? Is this something that is discussed in full governors’ meetings or at a curriculum meeting? Do we look at this on learning walks?

2. Are our teachers confident in handling different religions and beliefs?
   - Many primary teachers are anxious about RE: they don’t want to cause offence (this is good!) and they feel they don’t know enough about religion in general or the religion they are to teach in particular (this needs putting right). If you ask teachers to rank the subjects in order of the confidence they feel to them, then RE, music, languages, PE and ICT are usually the bottom five. Do this. How can you address teachers’ lack of confidence? Why not plan a day of whole-school RE professional development? You do it for the other four subjects, so include RE.

3. Do we know what we are doing in RE – and why?
   - Governors will know that RE has to be taught in all school types, but do you know why? Involve the subject leader to talk about the purpose of RE and share examples of pupils’ work. A curriculum audit against your local syllabus or your diocesan guidance is important, but it’s also worth looking at whether your school has run an RE day, entered an RE competition, sought the RE Quality Mark or shows other signs of lively practice. Is RE linked to your school’s special strength in, for example, forest education, dance and drama or local history?

4. What do teachers say about RE?
   - Are your class teachers all excited about open-ended discussion of big issues? Do they make easy links to art, music, history and English? Does RE lead on Philosophy4Children? Or does the conversation stop short at ‘RE: Gulp! Don’t ask me’? Ask the teachers what would enhance the learning. Persona dolls? Artefacts? Digital resources? NATURE Silver membership? Sometimes governors want to invest in a subject, and take notice! Get older pupils to run the questionnaire, and take notice! Get older pupils to run the questionnaire, analyse the results and present their findings to the governing body. What do children enjoy in RE? What do they want to find out about? What have they learned?

5. What do pupils say about RE?
   - A pupil voice survey of the children’s perceptions of RE can be very revealing, and will make governors sit up and take notice! Get older pupils to run the questionnaire, analyse the results and present their findings to the governing body. What do children enjoy in RE? What do they want to find out about? What have they learned?

6. How can we improve diversity and community links?
   - The government’s British Values strategy says that a single visit to a place of worship would be tokenistic. Is your school any better? Most schools manage a church visit, but many are also planning programmes of visits to temples and gurdwaras, mosques and synagogues. If parents are wary of such interfaith RE, should the school budget for coach money, so that the trips can be free? And when you go on a visit, how will you know that the best possible learning has taken place? When you discuss SMSC and British Values, do you include excellent examples of work that is done in RE?

7. What is on the shopping list for our RE subject leader?
   - Check that the RE budget this year is the same as for history or geography, and ask the subject co-ordinator what would enhance the learning. Persona dolls? Artefacts? Digital resources? NATURE Silver membership? Sometimes governors want to invest in a subject, boosting its profile. Is it RE’s turn for a boost?

8. How can we secure real excellence in RE?
   - There are no SATs for RE (thank the saints and angels). But a simple and lightweight RE assessment system, which informs curriculum planning and reporting to parents in a thoughtful and accurate way, is essential. Governors can see how progress is secured through portfolios of work, and often children’s theology and philosophy is charming as well as insightful: you might enjoy that part of your meeting!

9. How can we celebrate what is best in RE?
   - Ask yourselves: is RE assessed effectively? Are children making good progress in their thinking? If you have audited all that RE, and found good stuff, then make sure your teachers know how impressed you are. Governance should never be remote, but if you appoint a link governor for RE and their first action is to go around giving out the rosettes, then you can be sure that appreciated teachers will do even better. Ask yourselves: is RE assessed effectively? Are children making good progress in their thinking?

10. Shall we have a cup of tea and a biscuit?
     - After these nine ways forward for RE in your school, you are allowed a chocolate biscuit. It’s about all you get, but many are also planning programmes of visits to temples and gurdwaras, mosques and synagogues. If parents are wary of such interfaith RE, should the school budget for coach money, so that the trips can be free? And when you go on a visit, how will you know that the best possible learning has taken place? When you discuss SMSC and British Values, do you include excellent examples of work that is done in RE?