

**PE1487/L**

**To the Public Petitions Committee of the Scottish Parliament**

**PETITION PE01487: RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE IN SCHOOLS**

**Submission from Scripture Union Scotland**

Scripture Union Scotland (SUS) affirms the importance of Religious Observance for all members of the school community. We regret situations where guidance has not been followed, resulting in negative experiences for pupils. However, we believe that a move to make this an opt-in rather than an opt-out element of the curriculum, as suggested by the petition, would be detrimental to the education of Scotland's young people.

We fully endorse the idea that Scotland's education should be holistic, giving opportunity for intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual development. When Religious Observance (RO) is delivered in line with the Scottish Government's guidance letter of 22<sup>nd</sup> Feb 2011 (Curriculum for Excellence – Provision of Religious Observance in Schools) in an inclusive and appropriate manner, it is one of the few places in the curriculum which creates space for all present to reflect collectively and individually on their beliefs and values and understand those of others. It also gives the unique opportunity to experience the six sensings (: sensing mystery; sensing values; sensing meaningfulness; sensing a changed quality in awareness; sensing 'otherness'; sensing challenge) described in the Religious Observance Review Group Report of 2004. Together this strongly supports the Curriculum of Excellence vision for education, as has been demonstrated over the last 10 years through schools inspections which have included inspection of RO provision in both the formal and informal curriculum.

Religious Observance makes a valuable contribution to the lives of young people because it provides them with an opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs and values whilst hearing from a range of other perspectives. We fully support Headteachers having the opportunity to appoint chaplains and invite appropriately selected leaders of faith groups and those who wish to share a secular or humanist perspective with young people, in order to create "*community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school's community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community*" (definition of RO from review group document and affirmed in the letter of Feb 2011).

The petitioner argues that the diverse communities reflected in our schools make this kind of reflection impossible. We would contend that it is precisely because of the pluralistic nature of our society that we must provide space for young people to encounter different worldviews. Reflecting *together* in this way can help contribute to

making Scotland a country of greater tolerance and understanding. We therefore believe that this opportunity for reflection is important for every pupil and staff member. The proposed opt-in approach would create an unhelpful division based on a failure to understand what RO is and a false presumption that it is an attempt to manipulate those present into believing or adopting the practices of one faith.

We recognise that the title, Religious Observance, can often lead to misunderstanding. It is not, and should never be, confessional in nature, nor is it about forcing pupils to be part of a Christian worship event. The Scottish Secular Society asserts that "*compulsory prayer is the norm in Scottish education*". Historically this may have been the case but it is far from the truth nowadays. We are not arguing for a return to that position and indeed SUS, along with others, have been working hard to provide RO that ensures that no child is coerced in any way and that there is true inclusiveness.

We fully support the current opt-out system, including the need for clear guidance to be provided to parents about their options, and the provision of meaningful and appropriate alternative activities for those who are opted-out; with every assistance being given to Headteachers in making that provision.

SUS is committed to continuing to help schools deliver this key element of school life and to provide opportunities which are beneficial, inclusive and accessible to all in the school community which fulfil the vision for RO, or Time for Reflection, as suggested in the guidance letter of 2011.

We would welcome the opportunity to bring further oral evidence, including examples of good practice and expressions of positive experience of RO from schools, to the Petitions Committee when they meet, if that would be of assistance.

Yours sincerely

Andy Bathgate  
CEO  
Scripture Union Scotland

**Scottish Charity No 35168**  
**Company Ltd by Guarantee No 54297**