

PE1487/U

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Public Petitions Committee

By e-mail petitions@scottish.parliament.uk



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Dear Sir/Madam

Thank you for your letter of 6 September about the Scottish Parliament Petition PE1487, *calling for the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 by making Religious Observance (RO) in public schools and “opt-in” activity rather than an “opt-out” one.*

At its meeting on 3 September the Committee agreed to seek the views of the Scottish Government on the petition and the subsequent discussions.

The Scottish Government has clear policies on both Religious Observance (and Religious and Moral Education) in Scottish schools. We have issued advice notes to schools and local authorities to help them plan their delivery of both RO and RME.

Scottish Ministers are clear about the value that RO can have for young people in schools. It can offer opportunities for young people to reflect meaningfully on different points of view and values, including their own. It creates chances to think about the nature and possible meaning of life and humans' place in the world. It can promote critical thinking, supporting the development of an awareness that not all people think the same or share the same ideas and experiences about life. In this way, RO can contribute to development of the four capacities: successful learner, confident individual, effective contributor and responsible citizen.

The advice note on RO is clear about what this should mean in practice, including:

- Schools can and should provide RO which is inclusive, valuable and a meaningful experience for all.
- RO needs to be developed in a way which reflects and understands diversity within Scotland. It should be sensitive to traditions and origins and should seek to reflect

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these but it must equally be sensitive to individual spiritual needs and beliefs, whether these come from a faith or non-faith perspective.

- Further, many school communities contain pupils and staff from faiths other than Christianity or with no faith commitment. This must be taken fully into account in supporting spiritual development.
- Parents' views should be considered when schools make plans for RO.
- There should be clear information for parents about the right to withdraw and about alternative arrangements for those not participating in RO

All local authorities and head teachers were sent copies of the advice in early 2011. It is also available on the Scottish Government and Education Scotland websites.

In terms of parents' awareness and involvement, the Education (School and Placing Information)(Scotland) Regulations 2012 make provision about what a school's handbook should say about how the school plans and provides its curriculum, including RO. That includes:

- how a pupil's parents will be consulted about what pupils learn at the school;
- how a pupil's parents will be informed of any sensitive aspects of learning;
- how a parent can arrange for a pupil to be withdrawn from religious observance.

Parents have the right to question what arrangements are in place, and schools should be well aware that some parents and carers will decide to opt children out of RO. Schools should be prepared and willing to engage with parents who wish to have more information about what is planned or indeed wish to discuss any concerns and possible courses of action.

The Scottish Government would fully expect schools to engage with parents in a spirit of openness and collaboration in all areas, perhaps especially around religious observance, where it is clear that sensitivity and good relationships are required.

Children and young people, and indeed parents, have the right to be treated fairly and without discrimination. There should be clear information available about the right to withdraw and explain what alternative arrangements will be put in place.

The Scottish Government believes that the current legislation and guidance around Religious Observance is relevant and up to date and is not persuaded based on the evidence given that a move to an opt-in system would be helpful to young learners.

Yours faithfully

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