

Atheist wins £1000 compensation from council after religion-in-school dispute

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A Scottish man has been awarded £1000 in compensation from his local authority after he complained about the approach to religion in his son's primary school.

David Michael — who defines himself as an atheist — accepted the payment from Western Isles Council after a protracted legal wrangle. He claimed he was victimised on the grounds of religion at the school on the island of Great Bernera off the west coast of the Isle of Lewis.

The council, however, say that Mr Michael was "unreasonable" and because the case has not reached a legal conclusion in court, that nothing has changed.

The dispute started in 2008 when Mr Michael became alarmed at how lessons about Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela became infused with religion. He wasn't happy about a trip to a Bible exhibition, either.

When he complained to the school, he was told by the head teacher, Kirsteen Maclean, that if he removed his 8-year old son from religious education, the child would also be excluded from school assemblies and Christmas activities.

After a prolonged correspondence with the local authority and legal action about the way his complaints had been handled, the council paid Mr Michael the £1000 and costs of £1400. Because the case was settled out of court, no ruling has been made and no liability accepted by the local authority. Mr Michael intends to donate his compensation money to the school.

He said that he had become concerned about the religious overtones of the lessons his son was receiving and thought they were inappropriate, given his own opinions.

Lawyers who acted in the case — with the support of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in Scotland — said it was an important case, the first time a religion and belief case had been brought to court in relation to a child's education. No conclusion had been reached, though, so its significance is questionable.

The council, however, was unrepentant. A spokesman told the *Herald* newspaper: "The school was flexible with how it dealt with this issue throughout, but what we were adamant we would not do was change the curriculum on the basis of one parent's views. The parent did not want to have his child removed from religious education. He wanted to change the curriculum specifically in relation to the importance of faith to public figures such as Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, and we argue that was unreasonable."

The council said it had settled with Mr Michael purely to avoid spending any further money on the case.

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