

Case study: Difficulty exercising the right to withdraw from collective worship

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Thanks to campaigning by the NSS, sixth-formers have the right to withdraw themselves from collective worship. But faith schools often make this nigh-on-impossible, as this pupil's story from one academy shows.

My sixth form holds three assemblies a week based heavily on Christianity. When I looked into being able to leave these assemblies and found it was my right, I thought the process would be straightforward. My school/sixth form then carried out a number of meetings to "discuss" this – with the answer being plainly "no", despite that not being within their power. I still have not left assemblies which take up hours and hours of my time. When the principal mentioned in assembly about the laws on assemblies and why schools must do them, he failed to mention that should you want to leave, it is your right.

The National Secular Society provided support and offered to help me draft a letter of withdrawal which the school eventually accepted "with regret". My sixth form have made an easy process very difficult for me, all the while holding assemblies on why the "moon is less than 2000 years old" or how evolution is an alternative view, putting out a message to lower school that they are "broken" and naturally sinful. It has been nearly a year since I first mentioned leaving assemblies to my school and I have been met with difficulty, patronising leadership staff and multiple unnecessary meetings. I should not have had to explain my reasoning behind leaving assembly nor should my request have been under any form of scrutiny. I was told repeatedly the assemblies I have attended for over six years were of "value" to me; this is not the case. I am very disappointed in how my request (and the requests of others) have been handled.

The collective worship requirement turns school assemblies, which could be used to promote an inclusive school environment and explore moral issues, into opportunities to preach the school's ethos. In one of my last assemblies we had a speaker talking on the theme of "thou shalt not commit adultery" – an issue that we might want to explore critically. Instead I had to hear about how the "perfect marriage" could only be between a man and a woman and was appalled to be told that "a woman must submit to her husband". We were then treated to the speaker's view on how the broken society we live in is a result of our move away from the goal of the nuclear family - as about half the audience included divorced or gay parents or included LGBT+ students.

The school maintains a policy of abstinence based SRE, in line with its ethos, in an area where teenage pregnancy and children entering foster care is one of the highest in the country. Elsewhere the school's ethos leads it to stand by the idea that the age of the earth and evolution "will always be an area where controversy rages", matters up for serious debate where examination of other 'theories' is necessary – skirting the line on restrictions that should prevent them from misrepresenting creationism or intelligent design as valid scientific theories.

NSS comment

Education and schools officer Alastair Lichten said:

"This pupil's story is typical of the type of casework we deal with on a regular basis. While parents (and sixth form pupils) have the right to withdraw from collective worship, this is in practice often difficult. Typical strategies range from feet dragging to excluding pupils from prize-giving ceremonies and from blatantly misrepresenting the law to ostracisation and attempting to guilt or shame pupils with accusations of intolerance.

"This case also shows how the differences between a faith ethos and faith designated academy often blur. It is very much up to the whim of the academy leadership as to how aggressively the religious ethos will be enforced, which often comes as a surprise to parents or pupils who are not expecting a 'faith school'."

A Pupil

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