

End compulsory worship

We want to see the law that requires schools to hold acts of worship abolished. School assemblies are an important feature of school life. Inclusive assemblies with an ethical dimension are an ideal time to foster a sense of community in schools and promote the moral and social development of pupils.

Acts of worship are neither necessary nor desirable to achieve these important educational goals and compelling worship breaches pupils' freedom of religion and belief. We would instead like to see a duty on schools to ensure that all aspects of its curriculum, including assemblies, are respectful and inclusive of all pupils, regardless of their religion or belief, including non-belief.

In 2018, our [research](#) with *Censuswide* found that a majority of the public (52%) say school assemblies should be about moral issues, whereas just over a quarter (26%) agree that they should feature religious worship.

What's the problem?

The United Kingdom is the only Western democracy to legally impose worship in publicly funded schools. The law in England and Wales provides that children at all maintained schools "shall on each school day take part in an act of collective worship". Northern Ireland and Scotland have similar laws. Even in schools with no religious designation, the worship must be "wholly or mainly of a Christian character".

The law as it stands is an anachronism; the legacy of a society unrecognisable from the diverse and pluralistic Britain of today where citizens hold a wide variety of religious beliefs, and increasingly, no religious beliefs.

Many schools simply ignore the law, but where it is enforced it causes division and discrimination, as well as opening the door to evangelism and proselytization.

Parents have the right to withdraw children from collective worship, but many parents regard this as an unreasonable imposition on both themselves and their children. Particularly in non-faith schools, there should be no reason why parents should have to withdraw their children from any part of the school day in order to ensure their rights to raise their child in accordance with their own religious or philosophical convictions are respected.

School authority or teacher directed worship is inherently coercive.

What are we doing?

- We work regularly with parents who are experiencing difficulty in withdrawing their children from collective worship, or who are facing other problems related to compulsory worship. If you are facing similar issues, you can [contact us](#) for advice.
- We were instrumental in persuading the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to recommend that the UK repeal legal provisions for compulsory collective worship. We again [raised the human rights implications of Collective Worship](#) with the UN during the UK's latest Periodic Review (UPR), a process which involves a review of the human rights records of all UN Member States.

- We have extensively lobbied key influencers and all UK governments to abolish mandatory worship in schools. We have also [urged the Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) to consider the equality implications of a legal requirement on schools to provide, and for pupils to "take part in", a daily act of collective worship.

What you can do:

Write to your MP

Ask them to help end compulsory worship in schools

Enter Postcode: _____

Find my MP

Sign the petition

No child should be compelled to worship in school and no school should be required to organise worship.

- [Take action](#)

[No child should be compelled to worship in school and no school should be required to organise worship. Please join me in supporting this petition.](#)

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- [Share your story](#)

Parents, pupils, and teachers: need advice?

As long as the law mandates worship there will be problems, but you can help make your school more inclusive and/or to make withdrawing from worship easier. Our campaigns pages have plenty of information, but if you need more, please:

- [Visit our advice page](#)
- [Get in touch](#)

More information

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[Only 26% of the public think school assemblies should feature worship](#)

Check out our other statistics on compulsory worship.

The right to withdraw

How the right to withdraw works across the UK, how pupils/parents can claim it, and how schools can accommodate it.

We advocate comprehensive non-partisan reform of religion and belief education and an end to compulsory worship in schools, so no one has to withdraw from any part of the school day.

However, successive governments' reluctance to end compulsory worship or to make meaningful RE reforms mean that changes may take some time. Parents/pupils may therefore want to consider the option of withdrawal.

If you have concerns about worship or biased RE at your school please don't be afraid to raise them, concerns being addressed without the need to withdraw could be more impactful.

England and Wales

Parents have the statutory right under [Section 71 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#) to withdraw their children from RE lessons and acts of Collective Worship at all maintained schools, including faith schools. Parents are not obliged to give a reason for requesting withdrawal.

The parental right to withdraw a child should be freely exercisable and the school must give effect to any such request.

Currently, very few parents exercise this right. Many parents are reluctant to separate their child from classmates. Also, while schools are supposed to keep worship separate from other elements of assembly, many schools fail to do this, and parents may not wish for their child to miss the entire assembly.

Before exercising any right of withdrawal we would recommend discussing your concerns with the Head Teacher.

Requests for withdrawals are best made in writing, the simple text below should be perfectly adequate.

*As parents of **[Child's name]** we formally request that **he/she** is withdrawn from **worship/RE** of any kind in future, without any detriment.*

"Parents have the right to withdraw their children from all or any part of religious education. They do not have to give a reason to the school and the school must comply with their request.

Schools should ensure that parents who want to withdraw their children from religious education are aware of the religious education syllabus and that it is relevant to all pupils and respects their own personal beliefs. They should be given the opportunity to discuss this, if they wish. The school may also wish to review such a request each year, in discussion with the parents.

The right of withdrawal does not extend to other areas of the curriculum when, as may happen on occasion, spontaneous questions on religious matters are raised by pupils or there are issues related to religion that arise in other subjects such as history or citizenship.

It is the responsibility of the school to supervise children who are withdrawn from religious education, although they are not required to provide alternative activities. They are not expected to incur additional costs through providing supervision for the child."

Department for Education

If you experience any difficulty or obstruction in exercising your right of withdrawal, or have any specific concerns about RE or Collective Worship in a particular school, we would like to [hear from you](#).

Scotland

The law is covered in the [Education \(Scotland\) Act 1980](#). The Scottish Executive's policy on the provision of religious observance in Scottish schools is contained in [Circular 1/2005](#). Also relevant is the [Scottish Executive's 2011 letter](#) to the headteachers of all schools which includes reminding them of the right to withdraw and schools' responsibility to facilitate this.

On the subject Citizens Advice (Scotland) [notes](#):

"If you do withdraw your child from religious observation or education, the school must make suitable arrangements for your child to take part in a worthwhile alternative activity. In no circumstances should a child be disadvantaged as a result of withdrawing from religious observation or education."

Academies

There is some specific guidance for academies in the DFE's [Free school application guide](#) which states: "Your school must provide a meaningful alternative for pupils whose parents wish to withdraw them from RE, collective worship or other faith-related studies."

Sixth Form Pupils

Sixth-form pupils at mainstream schools and maintained special schools are able to withdraw themselves from collective worship, without the need for a parent's permission. [Section 55](#) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 amended [section 71](#) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 to ensure the right of sixth-form pupils to be excused from attendance at religious worship if they request so.

Isle of Man

The [Isle of Man Education Act 2001](#) (Chapter 33, Section 14) provides for the right for parents to withdraw their children in whole or in part from religious education and worship, without detriment.

Compulsory worship and the law

The laws underpinning compulsory worship across the UK.

In community schools, the law states the worship must be 'wholly or mainly of a Christian character'. In foundation and voluntary schools with a religious character, the act of worship must be undertaken in accordance with the Trust Deeds but will focus on the religion of the school as to practice.

For England and Wales, the main provisions concerning collective worship can be found in [sections 70 and 71](#) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

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While the above legislation does not apply to academies and free schools, such schools are usually contractually bound to honour the right to withdraw through their funding agreements.

The law on collective worship in schools is clarified by non-statutory guidance. Despite being published in January 1994, [Circular 1/94](#) remains the most up to date guidance for schools. The guidance states:

"Worship is not defined in the legislation and in the absence of any such definition it should be taken to have its natural and ordinary meaning. That is, it must in some sense reflect something special or separate from ordinary school activities and it should be concerned with reverence or veneration paid to a divine being or power."

In Scotland the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 requires schools to hold religious observance and provides for the parental right to withdraw. The Scottish Executive's policy on the provision of religious observance in Scottish schools is contained in [Circular 1/2005](#). Also relevant is the [Scottish Executive's 2011 letter](#) to the headteachers of all schools which includes reminding them of the right to withdraw and schools' responsibility to facilitate this.

- [Inclusive secular assemblies and worship in schools](#)

Advice for schools and parents on inclusive religiously neutral assemblies, and how secular schools can accommodate voluntary worship and ethical reflection.

[Read More](#)

- [Collective Worship Briefing](#) (PDF, 395 Kb)
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While you're here

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