

Inclusive secular assemblies and worship in schools

Many schools already hold inclusive secular assemblies which address moral and social issues without any formal worship or proselytizing component. This is an excellent way to bring the school community together and to promote the SMSC development of pupils. We also welcome moves to replace collective worship with more inclusive options such as "Time for Reflection". However it is important that any changes represent genuine efforts at inclusion, rather than simply confusing the issue.

Formal worship is neither necessary nor (where compelled) conducive to spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development or inclusion. Drawing on examples of [best practice](#) developed in Scotland, we recommend that schools adopt the following language/approach to worship/assemblies.

Schools can make reasonable and proportionate provision for genuinely voluntary opt-in acts of worship.

Assembly – a gathering of all or part of a school in order to communicate information and engage with themes relevant to the school community.

Time for reflection – a school community activity involving engagement with and reflection on a morally, socially or culturally relevant topic.

Personal reflection – personal worship/belief reflection in response to moral, social or cultural issue. This can take place within TfR – for example at the end of an assembly pupils can be given silent time to reflect on the topic in a manner consistent with their own religion/belief.

Organised worship – an opt-in group or community activity involving the manifestation of religion or belief practices. Facilitated but not led by the school.

This approach best respects pupils' individual freedom of religion and belief, while creating an inclusive school environment. This is considered in the following examples:

Case study 1: Religious festival

A religious festival is upcoming. During the **assembly** it is appropriate to discuss the religious and cultural significance of the upcoming festival for many people. At the end of the assembly pupils may engage in a **time for reflection** on the associated themes. This can include a **personal reflection** by pupils on how the discussed themes or the festival relate to them. During the festival **organised worship** groups may meet for specific religious activities related to the festival or its themes, the school may need to differ their normal arrangements for facilitating this e.g. the group may request a larger room than usual.

Case study 2: International human rights day

The school has decided to mark International Human Rights day. The **assembly** includes a presentation on the day and the importance of human rights. A **time for reflection** could take the form of a discussion of how human rights affect the school community. This could be followed by a **personal reflection**

where pupils think or pray about the role of human rights in their own personal beliefs/faith tradition. Pupils taking part in **organised worship** may wish to focus on the theme of human rights.

Case study 3: School incident

The school has experienced a difficult significant incident. The **assembly** provides an opportunity for the school to come together and be brought up to speed. A **time for reflection** may be used to discuss the pupils' concerns and provide emotional support. All pupils may benefit from additional time set aside for **personal reflection** and some may want additional sessions of **organised worship** to respond to the incident within their faith tradition, they may be supported by external visitors.

Case study 4: School celebration

It is exam results week. During **assembly** successes are celebrated, perhaps some prizes are handed out or pupils singled out for special mention. All pupils may be encouraged to take **time for reflection**, as they consider their successes/the future – something likely to lead to further **personal reflection**. Some pupils may seek out **organised worship** to give thanks for or to process their feelings regarding the end of exams.

In all four of these examples, the school is able to come together as a community/communities to receive support. Space is allowed for everyone's expression of religion/belief. But no one's freedom of religion or belief is undermined or made to feel excluded by compulsory worship.

Schools should always be clear with parents, pupils, staff and any guests what the purposes of assemblies are, and the role that worship plays. Good maxims should be that worship is always opt-in and that any personal or group reflection leaves pupils free to respond in the manner most appropriate to them – religiously or non-religiously.

If you would like to discuss how to make your school's assemblies or collective worship/time for reflection more inclusive within the current confines and hear more examples of good practice, please [get in touch](#).

The excessive involvement of religious representatives in assemblies should be reconsidered. The involvement of such representatives creates confusion over the purpose of assemblies and undermines their educational function by conflating education *about* and promotion *of* religion.

Representatives of religion and belief groups will often be an appropriate guest or complement to assemblies, however they should not lead it or conflate it with organised worship. A greater emphasis should be placed on the involvement of religious representatives not compromising the educational and inclusive nature of assemblies/time for reflection, and any representative invited into schools should be well informed on the differences between time for reflection, personal reflection and organised worship.