

Government confirms school worship guidance can be ignored

Posted: Fri, 9th Nov 2012

The Department for Education has confirmed that its own controversial guidance on collective worship can be ignored by schools. The guidance, published in 1994, stipulates that worship in schools "*should be concerned with reverence or veneration paid to a divine being or power.*"

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". In community schools, the worship must be wholly or mainly of a Christian character. Parents have a legal right to withdraw children from collective worship in all schools but many parents regard this is an unsatisfactory option as they feel it is unfair to exclude and separate their children from classmates.

The guidance stipulates that school worship must contain some elements which relate specifically to the traditions of Christian belief and which accord a special status to Jesus Christ. When published, John Patten, the Minister of State for Education at the time, described the guidance as a potential "turning point in the spiritual life of this country". The guidance, know as [Circular 1/94](#), caused an outcry amongst education professionals. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers asked why circulars were "being used to promulgate Ministers' personal predilections".

A spokesperson for the Department for Education told the NSS: "The guidance has not been withdrawn, but we are now leaving it up to schools to interpret the law how they see fit."

England and Wales are the only countries in the world where daily Christian worship is mandatory in all schools – even community schools.

The National Secular Society has long campaigned for an end to compulsory worship in state schools. Stephen Evans, campaigns manager at the NSS, said: "We very much welcome the Government's apparent confirmation of the irrelevance of this piece of guidance.

"We now hope that the Government will go further and consider a change to the law to remove the requirement for all schools provide a daily act of worship.

"We fully appreciate that school assemblies provide an excellent opportunity to bring members of a school together and create a sense of community. We also recognise that assemblies with an ethical framework can make a positive contribution to school life – but we do not accept that that it is either necessary or appropriate to do this within a religious context.

"Head teachers that regard religious worship as inappropriate for their pupils should expect the law recognise their situation – and allow them the freedom to decide for themselves.

"Likewise, young people deserve to have right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion respected and not have religion imposed upon them by the State."

[Find out more about collective worship in schools](#)

Also see: [Good God, will the role of Jesus be downplayed?](#) (TES)

Meanwhile, the Accord Coalition has commissioned a ComRes poll of 2003 people asking the question: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? State funded schools, including state funded faith schools, should not be allowed to select or discriminate against prospective pupils on religious grounds in their admissions policy."

Seventy-three per cent agreed with the statement, 18 per cent disagreeing. [See the full results.](#)

In the wake of this, the British Humanist Association and a local education pressure group in Richmond, Surrey, this week launched a High Court challenge to try to stop the Government creating more "faith schools" by the back door, without proper consultation. [Read the full story.](#)

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