

Don't remove right to withdraw from RE, NSS urges Welsh ministers

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The National Secular Society has urged the Welsh government not to remove parents' right to withdraw children from religious education until the subject is fully reformed.

Education ministers in Wales are [considering](#) removing the right of withdrawal as part of a proposed new [curriculum](#), which also proposes to rename RE as 'Religion and Worldviews' (RW).

In [response](#) to a consultation over the curriculum, the NSS said:

- It had "no objection in principle" to removing the right to withdraw from a fully reformed study of religion, but its support was contingent on "institutional and cultural change".
- The study of worldviews should be "genuinely objective, critical and pluralistic".
- The right to withdraw particularly helped to protect parental freedom and children's independent rights when faith schools teach RE in a way that aligns with their religious ethos.

The NSS also called for all pupils to have an entitlement to receive "a broad and balanced education about different worldviews".

The society said there were circumstances in which the right to withdraw would "undermine children's rights to access education and to gain understanding of and respect for those with different worldviews".

But it noted that religious groups' historical and continuing influence over the way religion is taught meant there would be "significant human rights implications" to removing the long standing right.

NSS head of education Alastair Lichten said: "In principle there should be no right to withdraw from any subject.

"But RE in Wales has historically been taught in a way which promotes religion. The right to withdraw has been a crucial safeguard against this for families with reasonable objections. And reforms to the subject don't go far enough to justify ending this safeguard."

The NSS also said the subject should be renamed as 'Worldviews' rather than 'Religion and Worldviews', which still treated religion as "the default" and non-religious worldviews as "an addition or afterthought".

NSS backs end to right to withdraw from RSE

Within the consultation the NSS also expressed support for plans to end the right to withdraw from a new subject of relationships and sexuality education (RSE).

And the society challenged the Welsh government's conflation of the right to withdraw from RW with the right to withdraw from RSE, arguing that the two measures had different implications.

Mr Lichten said: "Lessons about relationships and sexuality promote children's health and wellbeing and the harm caused by withdrawing children from them is potentially significant, both for themselves and for others.

"It is possible that through RSE children are exposed to information and ideas which conflict with their parents' religious convictions. However, this is balanced against the child's right and significant interest in receiving a full education."

RE Council's response

- The chief executive of the RE Council, Rudolf Elliot Lockhart, [said](#) it would be "necessary to ensure that the subject and its delivery will be objective, critical, and pluralistic in all settings" before removing the right to withdraw from RW.
- The RE Council also described the conflation of the right to withdraw from RW and the right to withdraw from RSE as "regrettable" on similar grounds to the NSS.
- The RE Council [represents](#) the views of a variety of parties with a significant interest in religious education in England and Wales.

Read more: [This isn't the time to end the right to withdraw from RE in Wales](#), by Alastair Lichten

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