

NSS urges repeal, not enforcement, of law on worship in schools

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The National Secular Society has urged the government to repeal the law requiring collective worship in schools in England after a minister said it would "investigate" schools which breached it.

The NSS has written to schools minister Nick Gibb to urge him to clarify recent comments to parliament and repeal the law.

Since 1944 all schools have been legally required to hold daily acts of worship which are "wholly or mainly of a Christian character".

The law is widely disregarded, particularly in non-faith schools. The NSS has long [campaigned for its repeal](#), along with the repeal of similar requirements in other parts of the UK.

Nick Gibb's remarks

On 31 March Gibb was asked what steps the Department for Education (DfE) was taking to ensure a daily act of worship was taking place in each maintained school.

[In response he said](#) every maintained school, academy and free school is "required to ensure that collective worship takes place each day".

"If the department is informed that a school may be in breach of this requirement, it will be investigated. Where needed, the department will remind schools of their duty on this matter and advise on how this can be met."

NSS letter

The NSS's letter said any efforts to enforce the legal requirement would "only serve to undermine parents' and pupils' freedom of religion or belief, alienate non-worshipping pupils and inconvenience school leaders".

It said "all aspects of school life, including assemblies" should be "respectful and equally inclusive of all pupils, irrespective of their religion or belief background".

It said the law was "anachronistic" amid rising levels of non-belief and religious diversity in Britain.

It added that where acts of worship do take place in schools, "pupils must be free to independently exercise a right to withdrawal".

The society also asked the minister what the government had done to "remind schools of their duty" and if there were any plans to withdraw or update the most recent government guidance on collective worship before any changes in enforcement.

The guidance was issued in 1994 and said worship in schools "should be concerned with reverence or veneration paid to a divine being or power".

NSS comment

Explaining his decision to write the letter, NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said any move to "tighten enforcement of this outdated and unpopular law" would be "astonishing".

"Ministers should clarify whether this represents a material change in their position on collective worship in schools.

"Laws mandating worship have no educational merit, are incompatible with a commitment to freedom of religion or belief, and are exclusionary. No child should be compelled to worship in school, and no school should be compelled to hold acts of worship."

Further evidence against worship law

The NSS's letter noted evidence that the law is widely disregarded:

- Last week [53% of respondents](#) to a snap poll aimed at primary school teachers, from the education publication *Tes*, said their schools did not undertake daily acts of collective worship.
- In 2019 polling from Teacher Tapp found that only [43% of non-faith primary schools](#) have some activity which they call collective worship.

It noted evidence suggesting the law is unpopular:

- In 2018 a poll commissioned by the NSS found that [just 26% of British adults](#) thought assemblies should feature religious worship.
- In 2019 a poll by YouGov for Humanists UK found that [only 29% of parents](#) of school-aged children thought religious worship was appropriate in assemblies.

And it noted that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child [recently asked](#) the UK what steps it was taking to repeal laws requiring worship in schools.

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