

No new options on religious observance in Scottish schools

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The Scottish Government has responded to the petition lodged recently by the Scottish Secular Society to change the current parental opt-out option on Religious Observance to an opt-in.

The SSS had called for an amendment to the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 by making religious observance (RO) in public schools an "opt-in" activity rather than an "opt-out" one. Perhaps predictably, the Scottish Government, a strong advocate of religion in general and Christianity in particular, is not minded to change anything. In its [Learning Directorate's response](#), all it does is repeat its current policy:

"Scottish Ministers are clear about the value that RO can have for young people in schools. It can offer opportunities for young people to reflect meaningfully on different points of view and values, including their own. It creates chances to think about the nature and possible meaning of life and humans' place in the world. It can promote critical thinking, supporting the development of an awareness that not all people think the same or share the same ideas and experiences about life. In this way, RO can contribute to development of the four capacities: successful learner, confident individual, effective contributor and responsible citizen."

Note here that this is *not* religious and moral education (RME) being discussed, where pupils might be expected to reflect on life's big questions through critical thinking. No, this is in the context of forced worship, without participating in which Scotland's future adult citizens will, apparently, be somehow deficient both as citizens and as human beings. The Scottish Government makes the claim that RO can contribute to the four capacities listed above, but nowhere is any attempt made to explain how or why this miracle of osmosis occurs, or on what basis its success or failure is to be measured.

The rest of the Scottish Government's response simply regurgitates its already known policy on forced worship in schools. It has however, clarified the policy on informing parents of their opt-out rights as they currently stand. In terms of parents' awareness and involvement, the Education (School and Placing Information) (Scotland) Regulations 2012 make provision about what a school's handbook should say about how the school plans and provides its curriculum, including RO. That includes how parents will be consulted about what pupils learn at the school, how parents will be informed of any sensitive aspects of learning, and how a parent can arrange for a pupil to be withdrawn from RO.

The response states: "Parents have the right to question what arrangements are in place, and schools should be well aware that some parents and carers will decide to opt children out of RO. Schools should be prepared and willing to engage with parents who wish to have more information about what is planned or indeed wish to discuss any concerns and possible courses of action."

What this doesn't say is that [current Scottish Government guidance](#) to school heads encourages them to dissuade parents from exercising their right to opt out, because RO "should also have a

role in promoting the ethos of a school by bringing pupils together and creating a sense of community." The so-called encouragement to schools 'to inform parents of this without applying pressure to change their minds' is clearly intended to play a guilt-trip on parents that in withdrawing their children from RO they will be undermining the very ethos of the school.

What parent would want to be accused of that? And is it not possible for a school to develop an ethos and community spirit without forcing children to worship a god they don't believe in? Evidently not.

The response goes on to state that "The Scottish Government would fully expect schools to engage with parents in a spirit of openness and collaboration in all areas" which is disingenuous since its own guidelines on RO clearly infer that effort must be made by the school in the collaboration process to dissuade parents from exercising their rights. The guidelines on RO are hypocritical in the extreme: parents are to be encouraged to compromise their beliefs in the interests of the school ethos, but the instructions to heads also states regarding the beliefs of school chaplains "their own religious beliefs should be respected and they should not be asked, or expected, to compromise them."

Perhaps most bizarre is this passage in the response that "Children and young people, and indeed parents, have the right to be treated fairly and without discrimination." As some of you may have noticed, the Scottish education system is a model of discrimination in practice, with its Catholic faith schools permitted to discriminate in admissions and teacher employment and promotions. You really couldn't make this up!

As even the most casual of political observers will know, governments when in power rarely, if ever, admit that they might — just might — have got something wrong. What rankles most in the Scottish Government's response is that it says it is "not persuaded based on the evidence given that a move to an opt-in system would be helpful to young learners." In other words, it is conveniently ignoring the mountain of evidence given by the Scottish Secular Society and the NSS (via Education Scotland) of the widespread incursion of evangelicals into schools where they not only lead RO but also take RME classes, and of the widespread failure of schools to make the opt-out known to parents or to make the full extent and nature of RO known to them.

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