

New guidance on the right to withdraw from RE in Wales – response

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New guidance on managing parents' right to withdraw their children from religious education in Wales is largely common sense, says Alastair Lichten. But it downplays the confessional nature of some RE teaching.

The right to withdraw from RE is a difficult area we deal with a lot in our casework. While it's obviously undesirable for pupils to be marked out in or withdrawn from any part of the school day, many parents concerned with poor practice and biased teaching feel it remains necessary. If the subject were *always* preparing young people for life in modern Britain, then we wouldn't want pupils missing out on that. But where the subject is confessional we don't want parents forced to accept it.

The largely common sense [guide from the Wales Association of SACREs](#) on managing this right addresses many of these issues. The guide starts with an aspirational statement most secularists would support, on the nature of religious education in the 21st century, which could be drawn from our own [21st Century Re for All](#) campaign.

This continues in the useful "background and context" section which says: "*Religious education is not about indoctrinating or nurturing children into a faith or promoting any particular belief system*". The problem is that in many cases – not least faith schools – it is.

Aspirational statements are all well and good but don't always match reality. For supporters of RE to pretend it is *always* non-confessional, "balanced" and "objective" doesn't help improve the subject any more than opponents pretending it is *never* these things. All it leads to is people talking past each other.

One tactic often used to browbeat parents into not withdrawing from RE or collective worship is to insist they will have to then supervise the children. The guidance addresses this by reminding schools that they remain in *loco parentis* when a child is withdrawn.

When the guidance considers why parents may request their child be withdrawn from RE, little to no consideration is given to the idea that they might have a legitimate reason. Parents can apparently only "misunderstand the true nature of RE" – they can only believe that the "school is failing to deliver on this aim" – no acknowledgment that RE in many schools includes the aim of religious inculcation.

While there's plenty of sensible advice for schools to discuss withdrawal requests, everything is framed in terms of correcting parents' 'misunderstandings'. There's no suggestion that schools may need to honestly examine their approach to RE to address concerns. One can't help but feel this legitimises the sort of browbeating and obstruction it claims is unacceptable.

The guidance tackles the [tricky issue](#) of requests to withdraw from RE (apparently) based on prejudice, an area where many schools would appreciate guidance. It's encouraging that it makes clear anti-religious or anti-RE views are not in themselves a form of prejudice.

We should all be concerned about parents seeking to shield children from objective learning about select religions. However the idea that parents might have a legitimate reason for objecting to how a specific religion is taught in RE is entirely absent. Also absent is a clear message that parents exercising the right to withdraw do so for ill-informed or prejudiced reasons doesn't affect the right.

Only one section carries the slightest implication that minimalising requests to withdraw might entail schools examining their practices rather than simply dismissing concerns. There's good advice, particularly around prayer. But again, there is no acknowledgment that faith schools (and others) do blend learning about religion with religious activities.

The guide's penultimate section deals with requests to withdraw from trips to places of worship, or visits from external speakers, and it is good that these are addressed as distinct issues. There's the same common sense advice about discussing concerns and seeking to address misconceptions. But again there's little to no acknowledgment that parents might have legitimate concerns, particularly where RE is not mediated by a professional RE teacher, but comes from someone with a religious agenda.

There's stuff on external visitors which could be taken straight from our own material on [evangelism in schools](#), which acknowledges external visitors including religious groups can make a valuable contribution to schools. Again aspiration ("*they will not try to persuade pupils that their views are necessarily the correct ones or denigrate the beliefs of others*") is presented as uncontroversial reality. The guidance doesn't suggest a code of practice to ensure appropriate boundaries are maintained by external visitors – though helpfully it does so for visits to places of worship.

The guidance acknowledges that "*sensitivities based on prior cultural experiences can influence a family's views on visiting others' places of worship*", citing the example of Christians and Ahmadis from the Middle East who may have experience of religious persecution. But what about the homosexual (or non-religious, or minority religious) parents who don't want their child going to a building where hate and intolerance is preached against them, no matter how nice the man is who will point out the fascinating artistic/architectural features?

Many people have a wholly negative view or experience of religion and regard visiting places of worship as fundamentally different from objective learning about religion in the classroom. That may not always be entirely rational, but it's probably an area where the right to withdraw should be respected.

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