

# This isn't the time to end the right to withdraw from RE in Wales

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*The Welsh government is considering removing the parental right to withdraw from religious education. Alastair Lichten argues that despite potential benefits, reforms don't go far enough to justify ending this longstanding right.*

The Welsh government is [consulting on plans](#) to remove the parental right to withdraw from Religious Education, to be renamed Religions and Worldviews. We want every pupil to have the [same entitlement](#) to high quality, non-partisan education about worldviews, something the right to withdraw can seem to undermine. Withdrawal from RE has long been a [source of contention](#), it is something of an anomaly and can be problematic.

But there are good reasons to be sceptical of these proposals – and the National Secular Society has raised them in our response to the consultation.

## 1. Why now?

The Welsh government claims that reforms to the way religious and non-religious worldviews are taught in school will alleviate the need for a right to withdraw. However, removing this longstanding right without first seeing how the reforms bed in seems somewhat premature. A period of time is necessary to allow a more accurate assessment of how the subject has changed and whether the right remains necessary.

## 2. What about in faith schools?

Faith schools will still be permitted to teach religious education in accordance with their faith ethos. Many teachers will continue to be selected on the basis of their religious beliefs and in many faith schools the subject will continue to be [inspected](#) by religious bodies rather than [Estyn](#), the education inspectorate for Wales. It is not enough to simply provide information about a broad range of worldviews, if a school continues to privilege a specific worldview or range of views. Denominational RE both directly and indirectly conveys a message that certain religious worldviews (or range of worldviews) are worthy of greater prominence or respect.

## 3. Do reforms go far enough?

Almost all European states make some provision for a right to withdraw from religious education. This is because in most countries, including Wales, the subject's roots (despite significant reforms) lie in confessionalism and faith formation.

The consultation's central argument is that a new "pluralistic requirement" negates any need to withdraw. Pluralism is a step forward, but it doesn't solve every problem. RE has evolved from a way of inculcating Christian beliefs to a way of promoting a largely positive view of the major religions – with Humanism increasingly thrown in to represent the non-religious majority.

The latest changes fundamentally don't change this advertising space mentality. What gets taught in schools will still be heavily influenced by local committees of religious groups, whose raison

d'être is their own representation in a positive light – something that is widely regarded as educationally inappropriate. [Most RE teachers](#) also view it as their job to promote a positive view of religion and frame negative manifestations as "false" or "distorted" to "counteract prejudices".

While the proposed new subject name of 'religion and worldviews' may be a step towards parity of esteem for non-religious ways of making sense of the world, it still frames them as an afterthought. Calling the subject simply "Worldviews" would convey a fresh start and move away from religious exceptionalism. After all, we wouldn't have a subject called "running and sport" or "drawing and art".

#### **4. What about parents' rights?**

Parents' rights are not absolute. They shouldn't get to pick and mix the parts of the curriculum they want their children to learn or be able to shield their children from objective knowledge about worldviews they don't share. But respecting parents' rights to raise their children in accordance with their beliefs (and children's independent rights as they mature) means they shouldn't be forced to accept RE where it retains elements of confessionalism and bias.

The consultation acknowledges that these rights are potentially breached "if a school fails to provide pluralistic education in these subject areas" and that "there is some risk that they may in practice be delivered in a way which in some respects does not meet that requirement".

In the many cases where we have acted to assist parents in exercising their right to withdraw from RE in England and Wales, there are no examples where parents have been opposed to their children receiving broad and balanced information about other people's beliefs. Where parents have concerns over bias, we always encourage them to discuss these constructively with the school. However, where the schools are unwilling or unable to acknowledge and respond to such concerns the right to withdraw remains an important if undesirable last resort.

#### **5. What's next?**

If this proposal to end the right of withdrawal from RE in Wales is implemented it will inevitably lead to increased pressure to end the right to withdraw elsewhere, particularly in England where similar reforms to the curriculum were [rejected](#) last year. They could even lead to pressure on the [right to withdraw](#) from collective worship. If parents can't withdraw their children from RE delivered by a trained teacher, what happens when it is delivered by an external visiting group, [particularly those](#) with an evangelical purpose?

#### **What do you think?**

If you would like to share your views to inform our response please [send them by Sunday 24 November](#). We also encourage you to [respond to the consultation](#) by Thursday 28 November, and to [write to your Welsh Assembly Members](#) if you have any concerns.

**[See also: Ensuring access to the full curriculum: NSS draft response](#)**

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*You can hear Alastair Lichten and Stephen Evans discuss these proposals with Emma Park as part of episode 17 of the NSS podcast:*

## Alastair Lichten

Alastair ([@AlastairLichten](#)) is a former head of education at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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