

Edinburgh Secular Society

Written submission for the Public Petitions Committee of the Scottish Parliament in relation to petition PE1487 - Religious Observance in Schools

Introduction

Edinburgh Secular Society (ESS) welcomes the Scottish Secular Society's (SSS) petition in relation to religious observance (RO) in Scottish schools. We welcome the broad debate this has stimulated and the opportunity it has allowed members of the public, particularly parents, as well as interested organisations to voice their opinions and engage with politicians at a national level. RO is an issue which raises fundamental questions regarding the privileged access and role of organised religion within schools in a modern and diverse 21st century Scotland.

Our independent research supports many of the findings and concerns detailed in the Scottish Secular Society's written submission. In particular, our report entitled '*Evidence of Evangelical Christian Organisations Targeting & Accessing Scotland's Non-denominational Schools*'¹ highlights how RO, and the associated Scottish Government Guidance Letters issued in 2005 and 2011, facilitate the unfettered access of a wide range of evangelising and proselytising religious groups to non-denominational schools.

However, whilst we agree with some of the key issues raised by SSS in relation to RO, we differ in our approach, in both principle and practice, in how to resolve them and create a more tolerant and inclusive education system.

Principle

As a secular organisation, one of ESS's fundamental underpinning principles is the separation of church and state. Consequently, we contend that the apparatus of the state, such as, its legislative bodies and institutions, including the state education system, should not be used to endorse or promote religious belief in general or privilege any specific religion.

Scottish Government guidance defines RO as:

"Community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school's community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community"

¹ <http://edinburghsecularsociety.com/documents-resources/>

However, 'spiritual development' is not clearly defined within the guidance. We contend that it is a euphemism for God or an alternative supernatural agency. As such, we challenge the government over its role in establishing and promoting RO within the state education system. Further, we argue that 'spiritual development' is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify and measure and for the non-religious is an exclusive experience.

Indeed, the Rev. Ewan Aitken (Church of Scotland '*Church and Society Council*'), Dr. Paul Gilfillan and Prof. Alison Phipps were authors of a report entitled '*A Research Report on the Reception of the 2005 Religious Observance Guidelines in Scotland*'². The research conducted in 2008 involved visits, incorporating interviews with pupils and staff, to non-denominational primary and secondary schools to assess the implementation of the guidelines. Within the report conclusions it states:

"It seems that until a model of RO for non-denominational schools is developed that provides an understanding of non-religious 'spiritual development' as well as shared classroom practices to enact this model, an inevitable result is an RO of the 'lowest common denominator' that gravitates to moral exhortation and communal singing rather than spiritual development....."

In addition the report states:

"When asked if RO is meaningful or effective, one practitioner admitted: 'I always find it hard to measure spiritual development among children'."

It further adds:

*"When one of the primary school pupils, when asked whether his RO teacher helped him understand what it is to be a spiritual person gave the honest answer: 'I don't know what spiritual means,' there seems to be a challenge issued to educators that goes unmet by practices such as **schools organising religious retreats for pupils, or having specialists come into the school to give sessions on prayer, meditation or contemplation.**"*

ESS concludes that 'spiritual development' is religious in context and exclusive. As such, we would advocate RO be removed from the state education system. It is important to note that ESS differentiates between Religious Observance, which is enacting and promoting religious belief, and Religious & Moral Education which as an academic subject we fully support and encourage.

² <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/68010/>

Practice

Edinburgh Secular Society notes the comments and findings of SSS in their submission regarding how RO is actually being delivered in schools. We:

- Endorse their concerns over inclusiveness for the non-religious and those of a non-Christian faith, as outlined in their example of a Christian ‘prayer space’ within a school.
- Share their anxiety over children being disadvantaged by opting out of RO, both in relation to lack of alternative activities being provided and the sense of being ‘punished’ as a result of the separation from their peer group.
- Endorse SSS’s genuine worries over RO being ‘contracted out’ to various evangelical faith groups.

Further, ESS has serious concerns regarding external evangelical groups and chaplains using the 2011 Scottish Government Guidance on RO to access schools, and to extend their roles so they have a pervasive influence over normal day-to-day school life. An example includes the Scripture Union (SU) Youth Associate Scheme.³ This involves local churches paying for a full-time Christian youth worker to access local schools. They are often given an office at the school and assist in RO. However, they can access pupils during all times of the day, e.g. in the dining hall and corridors. The Christian youth worker at Larbert High School states:

“Since taking the new office it has enabled us to make contact and build relations with students of the school who would not normally seek us out, We have a small group of about 15 students who now come in every day at the start of school and during break times and lunch. Amazing opportunity to grow seeds.”⁴

Expansion of the chaplaincy role is being promoted by the Church of Scotland; it has produced an internal guidance booklet⁵ which states:

“As schools look at more dynamic ways of delivering the curriculum, there are excellent opportunities for Chaplains to introduce faith-based resources like:

³ <http://www.suscotland.org.uk/education-and-schools/associate-worker-scheme/>

⁴ <http://www.syls.org.uk/stories/larbert-youth-trust.html>

⁵ http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/13295/302_C_and_S_Reps_Handbook_Leaflet6.pdf

- *Scripture Union's Outdoor Centres which deliver 'Classroom Outdoors' experiences for Curriculum for excellence (CfE)*
- *Youth for Christ's superb curricular material, all customised for Curriculum for Excellence."*

ESS argues that RO, following the implementation of the 2005 and 2011 Scottish Government Guidance Letters, now has a far more pervasive influence over school life than the required statutory six scheduled events per year. Against this background, we have concerns whether the opt-in option, as proposed by the petitioner, would address the issues and concerns highlighted.

We question whether the proposed tick-box opt-in and information letter to parents could possibly cover every occasion of religious influence in schools, for example, of Christian youth workers accessing pupils unscheduled and unsupervised in the dining hall. In addition, there is a growing, and worrying blurring between what actually constitutes RO and RME. This was highlighted by the Church of Scotland's guidance to Chaplains to promote Christian SU centres under Curriculum for Excellence.

ESS believes that children should be taught together, not separated according to their parents' religion. Issues of opt-in/opt-out, removing children from their peer group, providing suitable alternative activities and concerns over inclusiveness could all be resolved, or at the very least greatly reduced, if RO was simply removed from schools.

Summary

- We share many of the petitioner's concerns over RO in Scottish schools. However, we believe the 'opt-in proposal' is treating the symptom not the cause.
- As a principle we contend that it is not the role of the state to endorse or promote religious belief.
- RO is becoming more pervasive in normal school life as Christian evangelicals target and access schools.
- 'Spiritual Development' is not clearly defined or measurable, especially for the non-religious.
- ESS fully supports, and encourages participation in, Religious & Moral Education

Conclusion

- That Religious Observance be removed from the Scottish state education system.