



58a Broughton Street, Edinburgh EH1 3SA

Wednesday 4th September 2013

David Stewart MSP,
Convener, Public Petitions Committee
The Scottish Parliament

By Email to petitions@scottish.parliament.uk

Dear Mr Stewart and members of the committee,

We would like to take the opportunity to thank the committee and the team of clerks for hosting our delegation yesterday in such a professional and courteous manner. We are heartened that democracy has become so accessible in our nation.

As discussed at the meeting yesterday, we now submit our presentation of additional supporting material.

We look forward to further discussion with the parliament and other parties once all views are received, so we can seek the best way forward to ensure the minds of Scotland's most precious resource are safeguarded.

Yours sincerely,

Caroline Lynch
Chairperson, Scottish Secular Society



SCOTTISH
Secular Society

Presentation of
Petition PE01487
to the Scottish Parliament
by the Scottish Secular Society

3rd September 2013

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The Petition and what it seeks

Presentation of Petition PE01487



Our petition seeks to change the Education (Scotland) Act 1980¹ so that children are not automatically opted into Religious Observance by the school. It asks instead that parents are given an active choice between Religious Observance and a suitably meaningful alternative activity. In essence, we want the parents to be asked first.

Secularism stands for the freedom to follow your faith as you see fit, provided that in following your faith you do not harm others or impinge upon their rights. It also stands for the right to be free from faith, and that no-one should be disadvantaged by whatever faith stance they hold. Secularism is not about atheism, abolishing faith, or making it a dirty secret which has to be practised in the dark in private. The Scottish Secular Society is well aware that for many, faith is a positive choice to be made for personal reasons and something to be celebrated, not coerced.

Our petition is simple. It seeks a simple solution to a serious problem caused by a law that is not working as intended. A law that is out of step with the demographics of a thriving dynamic nation, with widely recognised notions of fairness and democracy and of the power of the individual to be the master of their own life. A law which, it seems, schools find confusing and hard to interpret, let alone implement correctly. A law which makes parents reluctant to exercise their rights for fear of confrontation or disadvantage to their child, and which leads in part to almost 40% of parents not being aware of their rights.

The Scottish people have concerns about the influence of religion in schools and religion in general. This parliament has made great advances in the fight against sectarianism, and we commend that. However, this petition does not seek to remove Religious Observance. On the contrary, the petition seeks to make Religious Observance fairer and more meaningful for everyone, both those who attend and those who choose not to.

Why we seek it

The personal experience of one of our members in opting his own children out of Religious Observance was the trigger to raising this petition. It became abundantly clear from discussions with the school, analysis of the legislation and discussions with others that many parents did not feel able to take the stand that he had. Having decided to act in concert with the parent, we sought the experiences of other parents, some of which are included in Appendix 1 and summarised as follows:-

- Children who had been opted out being left unattended in corridors with little meaningful to do.
- Children effectively being chastised for their parent's decision.
- Children being told to carry out menial tasks. (Sharpening pencils and cleaning a library are two examples.)
- Parents being considered "difficult" because they dared to question a head-teacher's wisdom.
- Parents being told there was no right to withdraw.
- Parents having to seek legal advice because a school couldn't or wouldn't provide acceptable alternative activities.
- Parents being told that alternative activities such as reading Humanist material would not be allowed.
- A teenage pupil who had a right to withdraw himself being forcibly prevented from leaving Religious Observance he objected to.
- Evidence that despite very recent regulations outlining correct requirements a large percentage of school handbooks in circulation still do not lay out clearly the parental right to withdraw.

In summarising his own views, the co-petitioner states,

"My daughter is reasonably well treated – it is in my opinion a very good school. She did however report that she had been sitting with the school secretary in the school office during religious assemblies and more recently had been taken, against my written instructions, to a church service. But maybe not every parent is as confident as I was to make a stand for what is the right thing to do. Perhaps most parents that might not wish their children to be exposed to some aspects of Christian religious observance just don't feel able to address the issue, face up to the authority of the school, risk their child being ostracised by non-conformance or perhaps damage an otherwise healthy parent – teacher relationship."

His conclusion was that:

- The law is no longer in accordance with the demographic of Scotland which has changed significantly since the last review.
- The system has a built in unfairness towards non-Christians and non-believers. Despite the Religious Observance Review Group advising that Religious Observance should be inclusive he cannot see how this is possible when non-believers or non-Christians are present. Despite the best intentions of the 2004 review and claims by the Church of Scotland to the contrary, much religious observance is of a confessional nature.
- Existing legislation makes the removal of Religious Observation, even from a single school, extremely difficult, requiring a poll of the local authority electorate. Even in the unlikely event of success this would result in patchy provision across the nation which would be confusing to parents. However, this is not what is sought, and it may well be that the petition, if granted, would actually strengthen Religious Observation through discussion.
- Therefore there appeared no viable alternative method, by which to address this issue, other than to raise it at a national level.

Reasons supporting our case

Our case for the proposed change rests on the following points:

- Change in Demographics
- Failures in the Current System
- Excesses within the current system
- Popular Support for Change
- Potential legal challenges to Religious Observance

Change in Demographics

There has been a significant change in the demographics of Scotland. The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey of 2011², which asked the religious affiliation question (***'do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?'***) revealed that there was now a majority (53%) amongst Scottish adults who professed no faith. This rapid decline in faith (16% from 2001) is broadly in line with the findings of Professor Brown (2008) which we mentioned in the original petition submission.

These figures reflect reported affiliation as opposed to actual practise, which is of course much less. If we look at church attendance in the UK as a whole, as reported by the religious organisation Tearfund³, in 2007, only about 15% of the population are regular attendees. Within that demographic the proportion of adults likely to have children of school age is about half of that figure. Why then do we expect children to participate by default in something so many of their parents do not seem to value?

The conclusion quite clearly is that it is no longer correct to assume that Scotland is a religious nation, far less a Christian one. Given that the figures presented are for all faiths, not just Christianity, we can no longer justify the automatic assumption of Christian faith in Scottish schools, with its attendant mandatory acts of Religious Observance, when it is now clear the vast majority of parents have no particular affiliation. As such, Religious Observance in schools should not have an a priori *"opted-in by default"* status.

Failures in the Current System

While the aims of the Religious Observance Review Group in 2004 were laudable and well intentioned, it never questioned the assumption that Religious Observance is a worthwhile activity for all. As a result, the review became an exercise to make Religious Observance more palatable for a diverse school community. This is a task which is simply impossible since there are such a wide range of views to encompass.

The outcome of the review was to define the stated aim of Religious Observance as *"community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community"*

This statement is necessarily vague, enabling the theoretical meeting of all views. Such vagueness, added to the design of Religious Observance courses at local and even individual school level, means that the content of Religious Observance varies greatly between different schools. We have encountered examples of Religious Observance materials being offered to schools by organisations that claim to have accomplished faith healing, or that tell children that what they learn in biology and earth science classrooms is not true.

The system that emerged after the review and as amended by the most recent circular⁴ of 2011 makes 5 key requirements of schools in the provision of Religious Observance.

1. That the school should provide at least 6 opportunities for religious observance during the school year.
2. That the Religious Observance which occurs should be sensitive to all faiths and none.
3. That parents should be informed of the right to withdraw, and given sufficient information on which to base their decision on whether to exercise that right.
4. That where parents exercise their right to withdraw, suitable alternative activities must be arranged for the child.
5. That no child should be in any way disadvantaged by withdrawal from Religious Observance.

There are problems with all of these five requirements. The amount of Religious Observance which occurs varies wildly from school to school, with some doing the bare minimum and others worshipping weekly or even more frequently. This is confusing for children who move schools.

The requirement that Religious Observance should be inclusive of all is logically impossible. What is fine for one religion is blasphemous for another, and any religious activity can be offensive to those without religious beliefs. A recent article in *Prestwick's Going Out* magazine discussed one school's approach. (*See Appendix 4*) They held a prayer week and space was set up for children to go and talk to God. There was talk of forgiveness, of throwing your confessed sins into a pool marked *no fishing*. A cross was displayed, and children could make figures for God to look after and leave them at the cross.

While this seems harmless, talk of God and sins alienates those with no faith. Worshipping the cross is blasphemous for Muslims and Jews. Buddhists do not believe in a deity, and Hindus believe in many. This illustrates the problems with even a seemingly innocuous approach to Religious Observance.

An on-going survey of school handbooks (*See Appendix 3*) has shown that school handbooks contain insufficient information about both the content of Religious Observance and the right to opt out. This information is not provided to parents, and so they remain unaware that they have the right to withdraw their child. We know from a 2012 YouGOV poll⁵ that **39% of parents never find out** they can opt out their child from Religious Observance, and another 40% who do know about the right to opt out find out from non-school sources such as other parents or the internet.

None of the many parents we spoke to in researching this issue were given information about the content of Religious Observance on which to base their decision about withdrawal at the time they spoke to the school about it. The recent (2012) regulations now require statement of the right to opt out within school handbooks, but this is not sufficient. Both the right to opt out and the requirement to provide sufficient information to parents on which to base their decision have been within legislation for long enough to prove that the system is failing.

Schools seem utterly at a loss as to what is a suitable alternative activity for children who are opted out. When we asked parents who had opted out what their children were doing, we were told that often they sit in the Head's office, or with the secretary or even unsupervised. Sometimes they are made to stand outside the hall while others worship, much as if they are being punished. We heard of children made to clean classrooms, made to sharpen pencils until their hands blistered, forced to write essays on how Jesus would feel about their opting out, or just left to their own devices as if they don't matter. None of these are acceptable alternatives.



Finally, the ideal that no child should be disadvantaged is merely a platitude and not delivered in practice. The lack of suitable alternatives to participation in Religious Observation, as discussed before, is symptomatic of confusion at best, or lack of interest at worst.

Perhaps ironically, the guidance circulars contain no formal guidance of any substance for schools to plan suitable alternative activities. We were in fact unable to find any information, in guidance circulars, in government websites or anywhere else of what a suitable alternative activity would comprise of. It would seem it is left to the individual school to decide. This is in itself indicative of the disadvantage which children are regularly placed under if they do opt out. The poor standard of alternative provision can be interpreted both by the child and by their peers as punishment, impacting upon the self-esteem of the child and potentially resulting in bullying by peers, as was reported by at least one parent.

Excesses of the Current System

The excesses found in Religious Observation come not only from within the schools but often from various external groups, presumably invited into school at the behest of the Head-teacher. Religious Observance is often “contracted out” to faith groups, churches and others to deliver, perhaps because of a perceived lack of expertise. This opens up schools to some potentially unsavoury views – views which have the potential to restrict the development of a child's critical thinking skills, to subvert a child's creativity and to fill their minds with notions which are patently false and indeed in some cases run contrary to government advice.

There are schools continuing to teach disputed Biblical mythology as truth, which can be perceived as inspiring tales of morality, harmless stories or as dangerous nonsense. During our research we heard stories of children as young as five being told they are sinners, and that sinners go to Hell, and that they can only be saved by praying to God. One child's class was encouraged to construct a “crucifixion rap” and encouraged to sing about the doctrine of atonement in a Gangsta patois. Not only did we find this offensive as non-believers, it seems that many Christians could also be offended.

A growing number of schools are being targeted by more evangelical external groups, one of which is Prayer Spaces in Schools⁶. This group aims to set up quiet spaces within schools where pupils and staff can have time for reflection, or in other words, to pray. While this sounds reasonable, it is concerning that the faith groups behind these are reporting that they are being used for healings of incurable chronic diseases⁷. Prayer spaces, when packed with faith symbols for Christianity, sold with the rhetoric of God and faith as seen in the report in Prestwick's Going Out magazine and promoted by Christian groups, are certainly not inclusive.

Most worryingly, creationism is trying to make inroads into our schools. One of our researchers blogged⁸ recently on a central-belt school that has a seven strong chaplaincy team, one member of which is a prominent collaborator with the American Creationist group Answers in Genesis. We have testimony that he and others may be helping shape Religious Observation content. The UK government has stated that creationism has no place in British schools, and we would strongly encourage the Scottish government to prohibit it too.

The Scottish Secular Society is concerned at the increasing number of creationist challenges some US funded organisations are making on aspects of UK society as a whole. At the Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre in Northern Ireland, the inclusion and presentation of creationist views⁹ caused uproar, and such creationist organisations are always looking for opportunities to access children.



At a Roman Catholic school in Paisley, American evangelist and abstinence campaigner Pam Stenzel was shipped in at great expense to misinform children, against Scottish Government guidelines, about sexual health. So great was her terrorizing of these children that one needed formal counselling, and yet no checking of her credentials or the content of her presentation seems to have taken place¹⁰. Pam Stenzel has no qualifications which legitimise her speaking on these matters. This particular issue should, we believe, alert us to the dangers of the current legal framework allowing such toxic views to creep in.

The event with Pam Stenzel was extra-curricular, organised by the school, hosted by them, but after school hours. There are many other extra-curricular events promoted by and in some cases hosted upon school grounds. Of particular concern are "lunch-clubs" and after-school clubs, which are usually free to attend. Because these events are extra-curricular, the schools view their responsibility as automatically abrogated, and frankly this is dangerous. The school promoting these events acts effectively as an endorsement of their facility, safety and competence. Schools should not be allowed to promote or endorse external groups whose activities amount to religious observance, and over which the school has no direct control. Such scenarios could lead to accusations of failure to exercise duty of care responsibilities.

Of course a good number of schools deliver children safely out of the educational system without them being exposed to such excesses but for the moment the law does not explicitly preclude the possibility. This petition seeks to amend the law so that schools ask parents first and provide them with the appropriate level of information on which to base a decision.

Popular support for change

It is very clear that there is popular support for change in both the law and the practise of Religious Observation in Scottish Schools. The number of signatures on our E-petition in a very short time-span was encouraging and broadly in line with what we had predicted given our limited reach, resources and publicity. Since the closing of the petition we have had many enquiries of how people can sign and support its aim, and in discussion groups the prevailing consensus is that religion must be chosen by the participant, not chosen for them by the state.

What became clear however during the petition period and in post-petition discussions is that many respondents want to go further and remove Religious Observance completely at a national level. This petition categorically does not seek to remove Religious Observance from schools however. Secularism is a democratic movement, and we respect the right of people to choose and follow their own religion. There is a discussion to be had over whether the actual practise of religion, rather than just the teaching about religion, should have a place in modern non-denominational schools in Scotland. That is not a discussion we are engaging in at present in this petition. The presence of Religious Observation is such a contentious issue, and any discussion of its future in state schools will be long and emotive. Our chosen stance is to seek the compromise of allowing it to remain for those who want it, and not forcing it by default upon those who do not.

Responses from the Press

The Herald newspaper covered the story of this petition extensively, and has given our campaign express backing. On Sunday the 9th of June, they wrote editorial¹¹ which included the following:

"Given our plurality of faiths, and the fact that a significant proportion of the population does not participate in acts of worship, we believe the Scottish Government should carefully consider the opt-in proposal, while examining whether the existing arrangements are sufficient to ensure that the rights of non-religious parents and their children are being respected."

Potential legal challenges to Religious Observance

As noted in our original submission, there is also a possibility that the present situation could expose local authorities to legal challenges at the European Court of Human Rights, along the lines of *Folgerø et al. v Norway*. This was a directly analogous 2007 case regarding Norway's implementation of Religious Observance and RME in which the parents argued that whilst they had rights to opt-out, exercising their rights was impractical.

The Court agreed, stating that the system was capable of subjecting the parents to a risk of undue exposure of their private life and that the potential for conflict was likely to deter parents from opting out in the first place. A similar situation prevails in Scotland. Parents allow their children to be subjected to religious ideas because the right to opt out, whilst present, is *impractical and illusory*. This is, the court stated, exactly what the Article 18 of the International Convention of Civil and Political Rights 1966¹⁴ was designed to prevent. Thus the current implementation of Scots law conflicts directly with this convention.

This is further confirmed in the report¹² of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, to the United Nations Council on Human Rights. He stated unequivocally in his December 2012 Report that cases where children are opted out and are disadvantaged due to lack of resources are *specific and clear violation of human rights*. Speaking specifically about the comparable situation in England and Wales, Herr Bielefeldt "*expressed clear concern*" about worship in schools, and "*acknowledged that despite the withdrawal options, such daily worship is still something that needs to be investigated by the UN*".

It seems, therefore, only a matter of time before the legal situation in Scotland with regards to Religious Observance in schools will face a similar challenge.

Implementation

The required legal change is minimal, and implementation at the individual school level will not be difficult or onerous. Schools carry out routine fact finding at the start of each school year, establishing parental consent for a range of activities from photography to trips, as well as medical details and contact information. It would be a simple matter to add a letter outlining the expected forms Religious Observation will take and their frequency, with a tick box consent form for each type of activity, such as assemblies, visiting ministers and clergy, visits to religious institutions, and festivals. Any additional activities which are planned during the year and require extra consent would be dealt with by a simple letter home, as is currently done with other school trips. This fulfils the requirement for parents to have adequate information upon which to base their decision on whether to opt in. The letter should also outline what the alternative activities would be, should they wish not to opt in.

Doing this would in fact benefit the school greatly, as they would have clear numbers for those who wish to participate in Religious Observation and those who require alternative activities, aiding in the planning of said activities.

In the course of the process of changing the law, there must be a discussion of what form acceptable alternatives should take. The lack of guidance and clarity on this issue makes it impossible for parents to make an informed choice. They simply do not know what they are choosing between.

Responses and challenges from organised religions

The Church of Scotland at first signalled no particular objection stating that it remained committed to "genuinely inclusive" religious observance being a fundamental part of the school curriculum. This petition does not conflict with this stated aim, but we do not believe that genuinely inclusive religious observance is possible when non-believers or believers of another faith position are present.

Later, speaking in *The Times*¹³, the Church of Scotland said that spiritual education was intrinsic to the upbringing of children. A spokesman said: "It is utterly implausible to imagine a parent having to opt in to other cross-curricular or whole-school learning activities." This statement is disingenuous, as other school activities do not impinge on the personal beliefs and human rights of the child and their family. It is not a breach of human rights to learn Maths or French, but to be forced to celebrate a faith you do not share most certainly is.

Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights¹⁴, adopted by the UN in 1966 and signed and ratified by the UK, expressly states that everyone should have the freedom to choose their own religion, be free from coercion which impairs the freedom of religion, and that the state must support the rights of the parents to ensure their children are taught in conformity with their own beliefs and convictions. Our current system of Religious Observation fails to uphold these principles to which we committed as a nation.

In the same *Times* article, Peter Kearney, for the Catholic Church in Scotland, has said that parents of children at Catholic schools had taken a decision to embrace the religious character of those schools. This statement was echoed by the Scottish Parliament in a quietly added paragraph to their most recent circular issuing guidance on Religious Observation in schools:

"17. Where a parent chooses a denominational school for their child's education, They choose to opt in to the school's ethos and practice which is imbued with Religious faith and religious observance. In denominational schools, it is therefore More difficult to extricate a pupil from all experiences which are influenced by the School's faith character."

The idea that parents buy into the faith ethos when they "choose" a faith school is misleading. Catholic schools are open to all and it is well known that parents choose Catholic schools for reasons other than faith. It may be that the school is more convenient, or they cannot get a place in a non-denominational school nearby, or that parents perceive it as a higher achieving school – a perception that the Catholic hierarchy has not hesitated to encourage.



Suggesting therefore that parents had taken a decision to embrace the religious character of those schools is not an assumption which can be safely made. Additionally, parents of children in state funded denominational schools could not justifiably be given fewer rights than parents in a non-denominational school. Asking parents their wishes should be no more onerous to a denominational school than a non-denominational one. If all parents accept and embrace the religious character of the school as the church claims, then the schools really can have no reasonable misgivings about asking parents first.

While many devout Roman Catholics have signed our petition, the Catholic press has been hostile. They have claimed that the petition aims to remove Religious Observation completely and absurdly that it would require parental permission before making the sign of the cross or saying "bless you" in response to a sneeze. This may be a genuine misunderstanding, but the wording of the petition is precise and these claims are without foundation. The petition is about children participating in Religious Observance, not about a staff member saying "bless you."

Before launching the petition, prominent members of the Free Church of Scotland agreed with our aims completely, stating that they had "no time for forced religious observance in schools." Sadly, when the petition went live they refused to officially endorse that stance. At the same time they brought forth the bizarre suggestion in the press that Scotland, a country that still shows lingering symptoms of religious division, should embark on a costly program of funding separate "secular schools", whilst returning all other state schools to church control.

Free Church Minister David Robertson said in the Times¹⁵ *"Let the secularists have their schools, teaching their values and let the Churches return to a system where we run state-funded Christian schools. This would give parents a real choice, and offer real diversity and equality in Scotland."* Secularism, as a political position, is of course barred from running schools, as it should be. Returning all other state schools to Christian Church control would trigger massive opposition, and is not a step a wise government would give any credence to. The idea of putting schools back under the control of any church is therefore an irrelevance and can be dismissed as such.

Conclusions

Taking an overview, the counter arguments from the churches are weak and fail to address the issues of personal freedom to choose your faith. They prefer instead to misrepresent our petition, and dismiss as frivolous the concerns of countless parents over their religious freedom. We do not think the freedom to choose your own faith is frivolous. On the contrary, we think that freedom to follow your faith (or to have none) is worth fighting for.

A positive merit of opt-in Religious Observance, and one that should appeal to believers and non-believers alike, is that it opens up a long overdue conversation on what IS meaningful. Spiritual education is the responsibility of the parents and whatever place of worship they attend. Given how diverse our society is, it is not reasonable to expect state schools to be able to encompass the dictates of all faiths with equal sensitivity, as what is acceptable to one faith is problematic for another. As such, it makes Religious Observance more meaningful for it to have a character defined by the shared values of those that want it, as intended in the original legislation and by the guidance circulars issued since then. Those who value such worship can participate knowing exactly what they are getting, and no-one has to compromise their faith or beliefs.

To summarize:

- The law on Religious Observation is not being met. Parents are not informed, not given a choice, and sometimes prevented from exercising their rights.
- The child is disadvantaged by choosing to opt out, through the stigmatic way in which they are treated and the lack of alternatives.
- The idea that Religious Observation can include all faiths and none is incorrect, and any officially mandated application of spiritual beliefs is highly contentious.
- Lack of expertise at school level and explicit guidance from the Scottish Government combine to allow massive variation in Religious Observation practises, including access to dubious groups and beliefs.
- The current opt out system is contentious in terms of human rights legislation, and this is an area coming under significant scrutiny from the UN.
- Changing to opt in would ensure everyone's rights, both those who want Religious Observation in schools, and those who do not, making it a perfect compromise.



- The primary responsibility for children's' religious choices lies with the parents and, once they reach the age of discretion, the children.

We hope that the material we have presented in the original petition including responses from the public, and that which we present to you today, both orally and in our additional submissions, will be sufficient to persuade you that there is an urgent need for reviewing both the current practises of Religious Observance in schools and the law upon which they are based.

References

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Appendix 1 - Collection of parental testimony about opting out

Over the summer recess a number of individuals were interviewed regarding opting out from Religious Observance. The questions asked and their views are recorded here.

Testimony #1

When did you seek assistance on religious observance?

I sought out the HSS last year while I was enrolling my 4 year old in to her Primary School Placement.

What was the area of concern?

I am concerned about both RME and Religious Observation.

What aspects of Religious Observance prompted you to discuss the matter with the school?

I don't think Religious Observation has a place in the school system (it belongs in churches) and I do not believe the RME is unbiased and well covered.

Who did you discuss it with?

In the first instance the Deputy Head Teacher, followed by the Head Teacher.

Were you aware at the time of your right to opt out?

Not until it came time to enrol my child.

Are you aware now?

Yes

How did you find out about your right to opt out?

There was a tick box on the enrolment form, but did state that should I tick I would need to discuss with someone from the school.

What does the School Handbook say about the right to opt-out?

Doesn't say anything about it.

Did you decide to opt-out and why?

We decided to opt her out of Religious Observation as I feel really strong that this should not be in our schools at all but due to our child just starting school we have left her in RME as there was no alternative provided for and did not want her separated from her class mates at a crucial settling in period.

What information was provided to help you in this decision?

From the school, nothing other than long conversation with Head Teacher. I did my own research and spoke to HSS.

Were you actively discouraged from opting out in any way?

Yes, both Deputy Head and Head Teacher made me feel like I was being a bad parent by segregating her from the rest of the school "If you do this to your child she will be the only child in the school that has opted out" and that I was the one making a fuss about nothing.

What suitable alternative provision was made for your child when he or she was not present at Religious Observance (or RME)?

None suitable in my opinion. None for RME.

Where is/was this carried out? Classroom? School office?

Sometimes in classroom some times in play areas

Who carried this out? A teacher or someone else?

Who ever was free, teacher or class room assistants.

Were you satisfied with the alternative provision given to your child? Did you feel your child was disadvantaged in any way on account of opting out?

I don't think at present she is disadvantaged, but I am not happy about provision.

Did opting out resolve the issues or did they worsen? What was the end result?

I think the Head Teacher thinks it has and that it is the end of the matter but I do not. The school should be doing better and I should not feel the need to opt out.

Were any other steps necessary?

I have spoken to North Lanarkshire Council's Education Department, my councillor and my MSP all of them fail to take ownership of my issues.

Were you aware of this petition? If you were aware did you sign it?

Yes and I did sign it



Do you have any further comments to make on this matter in the light of our petition?

My daughter has been going to this school since she started Nursery at 3 years old, so indoctrination starts then. The Head Teacher stated that they do not teach non-belief as an option as this is a difficult concept for 5 year olds to grasp. My answer to this was if you cannot teach about non-belief you should not be teaching about belief and that before my child started nursery she had never heard about god or Jesus and that because of her schools attempted indoctrination of my child that at 3 years old I had to explain it to her and she seems to get on fine with the concept.
AML August 2013

Testimony #2 Parent's Questionnaire on Opting Out from Religious Observance / Religious Education

Why did you seek assistance from Enquire? (Enquire is a charity funded by the Scottish Government)

Clarification of the law regarding whether RME is a compulsory subject for at secondary school.

What was the area of concern Religious and Moral Education (RME), Religious Observance (Religious Observation) or both?

RME

What aspects of Religious Observance (or RME) prompted you to discuss the matter with the school?

My 13 yr. old son is an atheist and he feels he is treated with derision by his RE teachers for disagreeing with them on matters of faith. I believe this exacerbates my son's stress level during the school day (the educational psychologist involved with my son believes he has an ASD and is therefore finds school to be particularly stressful).

Who did you discuss it with?

I verbally requested to the Depute Head (for my son's year) that my son be withdrawn from RE classes. The Depute Head explained that this would not be a feasible option because the school would need to find an alternative provision for my son during RE classes.

Were you aware at the time of your right to opt out?

I was not aware of my right to opt out.

Are you aware now?

I am now aware of my right to opt out.

How did you find out about your right to opt out?

I bought "A – Z of Scots Education Law: A Guide for Parents (Scottish Consumer Law)" and it explained my rights with respect to my children being opted out of RME/Religious Observation/RI.

What did the School Handbook say about this then? Is it easy to understand?

The school handbook mentions that parents have the right to opt out but I hadn't read it. I have now read it and it is easy to understand.

What does the School Handbook say about this now?

Same as before.

Did you decide to opt-out and why?

Yes – to reduce my son's stress levels at school.

What information was provided to help you in this decision?

A member of Secular Scotland confirmed to me that the quote I gave from the book mentioned above is still current.

Were you actively discouraged from opting out in any way?

Yes – the DHT explained to me that it would be difficult to find a suitable alternative place/activity for my son during RME classes. The fact that I have the right to have my child opted out of RME was not mentioned to me.

What suitable alternative provision was made for your child when he or she was not present at Religious Observance (or RME)?

Not yet known. Letter to school will be posted today or tomorrow (14th Aug 2013)

Were you aware of this petition? If you were aware did you sign it?

Yes I was vaguely aware of a petition but I have not signed it.

Any further comments?

The charity "Enquire" wrongly advised me that RME is the only compulsory subject and therefore the school would not agree to my son being opted out of RME classes. The educational psychologist wrongly advised that the school would not agree to my son being opted out of RME because it was the school's aim to maximize class attendance. However, aside from this one element of wrong information from Enquire and from the Ed Psych, I have received extremely useful



advice from both enquire and the Ed Psych with regard to my son's Additional Learning Support Needs.

(N.B. The school is a Roman Catholic school.)

VA August 2013

Update 14/8/2013: "I spoke with my son's guidance teacher this afternoon and he genuinely doesn't know we're talking Right rather than Privilege. He seems to think the decision to make alternative provision during RME/Religious Observation/RI is at Head teachers discretion....either that or he was bluffing very convincingly. That makes two of them - because the Deputy Head Teacher bluffed similarly at the end of term or he's also not aware of the right."

Testimony #3 Interview: A Parent's Experience of Religious Observance

Are you aware of your legal right to opt your child out of Religious Observance?

I was not made aware; I came across it via the internet.

Are you aware that only around 60% of parents know of this legal right?

It makes sense as it appears to be very badly publicised by the schools

Are you aware that only around 20% are properly informed by the school of this legal right?

Again, it is very badly publicised. It was not mentioned once at my son's induction at primary school

Are you aware that this legal right is enshrined in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 which states that parents must be given sufficient information upon which to base a decision?

I was not aware, but am now after I have had to ask questions.

Are you aware that most parents don't even get that chance because many handbooks leave this information out of the list of items that are mandatory for inclusion in school handbooks?

As per the above, it is very badly publicised, either on purpose or honest mistake.

Are you aware that children are, in some cases on a daily basis, forced to attend religious services because it is assumed their parents agree?

I was not aware that in a non denominational school that the church would wield so much power that it forced children to obey its dogma.

Do you think it is right that when most Scots have no religious affiliation at all, the state still imposes Christian prayer upon them unless you opt out?

Absolutely not, it should be an opt in, that way, if parents want their children to miss out on a class that will provide a tangible benefit to education to go visit a church, then they can without dragging everyone else out. An hour spent in a Science book is far better spent than on bended knee to a made up super villain.

Do you think it is right, if you are a non Christian believer, that your child is

forced to endure Christian religious observance unless you opt out?

It is absolutely not right that superstition is imposed on children at all, and that a completely secular stance should be the default position unless the parents wish their child to go speak to the clergy, pray etc...

Do you think it is right that your child could be disadvantaged or considered different if you do exercise your legally protected right to opt out?

Absolutely not, this is just religion playing the proselytising card, "come with us, believe what we believe or you will be left in the secretary's office with some colouring in to do".

Do you think it is right that your non belief or disagreement with the State's preferred religion is made public and your right to privacy breached?

No I do not believe it should be made public as it is a personal opinion, however I will take a hit on my lack of belief in nonsense so that my child is not forced to bow his head to a supernatural ghost.

Or do you keep quiet because the system currently encourages you not to rock the boat or upset a great teacher. parent relationship?

This was my first thought, but someone has to make a stance against this ridiculous religious assumption.

Do you think that a system of religious observance where parents opt in and positively choose religious observance of a nature you desire will be fairer and more rewarding for all?

Yes, I believe it would. The pious can go about their business and the non believers or believers of other faiths can get on with the task in hand, which is about filling as much school time up with education, not religious observance

PS July 2013

Testimony #4 - Testimony of Mrs M – A Lanarkshire parent with two children aged 9 and 11 in the same primary school – who took the trouble to write extensively on her plight.

Summary

- Parents not informed about additional Religious Observance being conducted by an evangelical lay preacher during lunchtimes.
- Assumption made by the school that Christianity could not give parents cause for concern.
- School unable or unwilling to provide background information on lay preacher or content of his material.
- Child felt punished due to exclusion.
- Child being given moral guidance by lay preacher.
- School (head teacher) attempting to persuade parents to relent on the opt out decision.
- School staff complained that staff were unable to worship because they had to provide alternative teaching for those opted out.
- Class Teacher attempting to persuade parents to relent on the opt out decision.
- School concerned that opt-outs increased due to discussion of the matter.
- School unaware of what actually constituted a “meaningful alternative” to Religious Observation.
- School provided with additional material by HSS for the purposes of providing a “meaningful alternative” to Religious Observation but not likely to have taken it up.
- School fails to live up to inclusive ethos by holding end of term award ceremony at local church.

“I initially found out that my son was attending The Awesome Lunch club and called the school to find out what it was and why he was there without us being asked. The head teacher at the time reassuringly told me he was an Evangelical Lay Preacher, clearly assuming that I'd be okay with that. I said that I wanted more

information, which religion or organisation he represented. I was told "it was nothing like that, he was a Christian"

It was clear to me the fact he was Christian was supposed to make me feel ok with the situation. She was clearly unwilling or unable to give me information about who the guy was and why he was there and I found her evasive. I told her I didn't want my kids going back and said I was extremely disappointed at not being consulted.

I left it at that until I went to parents evening and his teacher said that she felt that my child was affected by no longer going, as though he'd done something wrong. We found this unsettling because we felt that the school had been the ones wrong to give unapproved access in the first place.

My child had been saying things like "why don't we go to church" and "wouldn't it be nice to go to church" suddenly asking questions about God. When I asked about the club all he could tell me was that he got out of class early to get to the front of the lunch queue (at first I thought this was the point of the Awesome Lunch club as the name gives no other indication), but then also said that the minister teaches them what it is to be "a good Christian boy"

When we left the parents evening that night we decided we were going to escalate the verbal complaint to a written complaint and stopped to tell the new head mistress on the way out. We told her we were telling her as a courtesy as she was new and previously unaware of our verbal complaint. In this discussion she seemed very surprised that consent was not sought and said that she would have had she been in place.

After we'd advised the school in writing we wanted the boys excluded from Religious Observation she called my husbands mobile and asked "what about assemblies, were hymns are sung?" he said that was ok. Sadly he didn't consult with me, because my attitude was, why are there hymns at assembly in a non denomination school? It later emerged that the same minister attends an assembly once a month to give a talk, so the kids don't go to that they also don't go to church services. It appeared that the head felt this short call addressed our concerns and we had to call back to prompt a proper response, she said she'd discussed it with us at a meeting (she hadn't) so we escalated the complaint to our local authority.

Not much more was said about it until the start of this school year during a meeting at the school. Unfortunately my husband was unable to accompany me, so I went along on my own. At the end of this meeting the teachers brought up the exclusion from Religious Observation. I felt very cornered and conscious of the fact I was there alone and these discussions were not being documented. With hindsight I should have asked them to put in writing all the points discussed, but I didn't, so it's all a bit he said she said.

The following points were raised with me during this meeting of 4th Oct 2012 attended by the Head and class teachers.

The head teacher said that a member of staff has complained that they are unable to participate in worship when they have to supervise our children's absence from Religious Observation. I pointed out that her staff are not there to worship, they're there to educate.

The class teacher stated that she raised her children taking them to church and attending RME/Religious Observation and then allowed them to decide what to do as adults and that one of them now doesn't go to church. I had not answer to this, how she raised her kids is her concern.

The head teacher said she recently she had a couple of questions and complaints regarding the minister and it seems that these "*have originated as a result of a parent approaching other parents at the school gate.*" She just wanted to say that when things are said they cannot be unsaid and we must be mindful of what we say as it can have a detrimental affect on a persons reputation. I asked her if she was implying that I was the parent and she denied it, but again reiterated that things had been said and that the minister's reputation was at stake etc. I advised the head teacher that I'm not usually at the school gates (I was in full time study) and when I am I don't really speak to other parents. I pointed out that I complained via the proper channels without canvassing the opinions of other parents because I didn't care if anyone else agreed with me or not. As far as I was concerned the matter was dealt with, unsatisfactorily to my mind, but dealt with all the same. To my mind she was insinuating that it was me who was the cause of the friction. I later spoke to a mother of one of my sons friends relaying the conversation and she agreed it seemed they were suggesting that I was to blame for these parents suddenly being concerned about the minister's involvement. She said she found this odd because the school had in fact sent a letter out to parents advising that the minister was running the lunch club (this was the first time other parents had been informed of it despite my complaint) and this had provoked parents to ask what an Evangelist was. I hadn't received this letter as clearly I already knew about him. The other mother said that a parent had asked her what an Evangelist was and that she had told her "it's like a cult" so she felt that I was actually taking the flack for something she had said. The other mother insisted on calling the head to advise her that I hadn't said anything about the minister other than mentioning in passing that I had withdrawn my kids from it and told the head that she'd used the word cult. The headmistress called me later that day to tell me that she'd been made aware of how upset I was by our discussion and that the other mother had approached her to clarify that I'm never at the school gates and wasn't the source of these new concerns that had been expressed by a few different parents. The head still insisted she was not blaming or accusing me etc. I told her I was glad to hear it, because assuming a parent complained because I had coaxed them to devalues that other

parents complaint, which obviously isn't fair to the other parent.

I told her that it seemed clear to me that the reason she is suddenly being asked about this minister is that she had only just issued a letter advising parents of his presence in the school and that had the school been upfront prior to allowing him access to the school these questions and concerns would have been raised sooner rather than later.

The head teacher and class teacher told me that my child had been saying things in class about not going to assemblies the minister attended. Over the next couple of days I subtly asked my child if he ever mentioned the minister in class or ever spoke about him and I asked if kids ever asked why he didn't go to assemblies/church and what he said. My child insisted he hadn't said anything and that if kids asked he just said that his mum had said he doesn't need to go. I have no reason to doubt his account. I thought about it some more and realised that the teachers comments about my son speaking of the minister were very vague. I then called the head teacher and asked her what exactly he had said, to whom and which member of staff had heard him say it? I was told no one had actually heard him say anything but he "must have said something" because the girl who sat next to him now no longer attended Religious Observation. I pointed out that the chattering of two 9 year old children is not going to result in one of them being withdrawn from Religious Observation, as it's not a decision a parent takes lightly. The head admitted that she was unable to advise of anything specific he had said and that they had made assumptions. I told her that this was unprofessional and reminded her what she had said about the minister and that if things said against a persons character cannot be unsaid this must apply also to a child's character and reputation. I also told her I was unhappy that the finger had been pointed at my child and I imagine that the parents of the girl who'd been removed from RMO would not be happy to hear that the decision was being credited to a 9 year old school boy and not them. I also said I wasn't happy that my child's teacher was adamant he'd said something when there was no basis for that claim. At this point the conversation was quite heated, the head was trying to talk over me and I asked her to allow me to make my points.

I was also told that my children had complained to her about being removed from Religious Observation. I was told that these assemblies were great fun and all the other kids seem to really enjoy them and get a lot from them. I discussed this matter with my kids and told them that if they really don't want to be excluded from these Religious Observation events I will allow them to go again and I wouldn't be annoyed. They were adamant that they are happy not to go and said that other kids say they are lucky they don't need to go and now another few kids no longer participate in them. They did say that on one occasion they had been given school work to do, but usually they get to go to the school library to read and they really enjoy that time. I agreed with my kids that if the other kids are having recreational time during Religious Observation then it seems unfair to me that they

are given school work to do. I discussed this with the head teacher by telephone saying that if the rest of the school are having recreational time with an Religious Observation element, that it seems only fair that my kids should have recreational time without an Religious Observation element as a meaningful alternative. I told the head that it seemed very unfair to me that they are given additional schoolwork to occupy their time. I stated that I had no issue with them being asked to continue with work they are already doing if they have fallen behind in class and have actual catching up to do, but giving them additional work seemed punitive. The head teacher seemed genuinely at a loss as to what a "meaningful alternative" is and asked what I thought was appropriate, she sounded quite exasperated at this point. I advised I'm happy for them to catch up if needed or read.

She went on to say that the boys seem quite agitated around RE and my elder son in particular is not participating well and says things like "this is rubbish, why do I have to do this when I don't believe it", and that this had upset the other children. I told her that I want them both to do RE because, regardless of our beliefs, religion exists and I think they should be educated about it. I told her I'm unhappy to learn he's not being respectful to other kids beliefs - it didn't really occur to me at the time that she should be encouraging the other kids to be equally respectful of his alternative viewpoint!

In retrospect , it strikes me that if kids are being educated about any topic, they should be encouraged to discuss their feelings and ask questions and explore the topic.

I suggested that perhaps it was time to remove the boys from RE too and the conversation quickly ended there, I assume because the last thing she want's is them removed from RE, given she cannot make alternative arrangements for Religious Observation.

After this conversation I sent the Humanist Society's Education officer, then Ms Clare Marsh, a short email advising that my head seems genuinely at a loss as to what "a meanful alternaitve to Religious Observation" was and requested guidance.

Ms Marsh kindly offered to provide books and teaching materials for the purposes of provision of a meaningful alternative and offered in addition lesson plans and notes for teachers which could be freely downloaded and used as required.

She also stated that the HSS would also visit schools to take assemblies or work with classes and would be very happy to arrange to visit your school if you thought it would be appropriate.

Since that time the head teacher has never mentioned this letter to me and I am unsure if she ever pursued the offer.



Finally I would add that my elder child is about to move up to high school, so the P7 class have a leavers ceremony that parents are invited to. The head teacher advised that they would be holding their School Awards Ceremony during the end of year service in the village Church. So our kids missed out on what should be a non religious inclusive event because the school choose to have it as part of a church service. I find this disappointing and feel excluded on account of my lack of belief. Due to this I took them out of school that morning and we went to Summerlee and I provided my own meaningful alternative.”

Testimony #5 Interview: A Parent's Experience of Religious Observance

Why did you seek assistance on religious observance?

I became concerned that my daughters' non-denominational primary school (administered by Scottish Borders council) had overtly Christian content in its assemblies, but also had an evangelical Christian club 'Adventurers' operating in the school 'under the radar' with very little information for parents about what was going on. The school website

([http://www.kingslandprimary.org.uk/index.cfm?](http://www.kingslandprimary.org.uk/index.cfm?action=generalinfopage&pageid=689)

[action=generalinfopage&pageid=689](http://www.kingslandprimary.org.uk/index.cfm?action=generalinfopage&pageid=689)) describes the club as "Adventurers" is voluntary attendance for P4 to P7 meet for games, songs and stories during Friday lunchtimes." The school handbook also mentions that it is a weekly club but doesn't say what it does. Why no mention that it is run by evangelical Christians? What are they trying to hide?

What was the area of concern?

Primarily Religious Observation, and the lunchtime club. I'm led to believe (based on the school handbook) that the RME teaching is more balanced and multi-faith, although all the faiths they learn about are mono-theistic, and it's not clear that they get the humanist/secular perspective at all.

What aspects of Religious Observance prompted you to discuss the matter with the school?

The fact that a priest was coming into the school to take some assemblies, the fact that there were school trips to a church for Xmas, Easter and end of summer term events, which were taken by priests and with overtly religious content. In particular also the fact that Adventurers was operating in the school with no information about what was going on, and rewarding the kids for good attendance with stickers and other prizes.

Were you aware at the time of your right to opt out?

I found out when I started looking into the matter. I found two Scottish government policy documents (written as letters from Laura Stewart to head teachers) relating to it on the web. I was somewhat shocked to discover that Religious Observation and Christian clubs are permitted in non-denominational schools- it appears that non-denominational doesn't mean 'non aligned to any religion', but instead means 'any kind of Christianity you like'.

What does the School Handbook say about the right to opt-out?

It still says nothing about the right to opt out.

Did you decide to opt-out and why?

I went to talk to the head teacher about this, but I decided against opting my eldest

daughter (7 at the time, now 9) out of the lunch club 'Adventurers'. She enjoys structured activities, and the songs and stories. She confuses the group leaders with teachers, and assumes that things she hears them say in school are true. She's swallowing the Christian story all hook line and sinker despite our attempts to be more balanced at home (my wife and I are atheists). She would have been upset and felt left out if I'd asked for her not to be allowed to attend, and I feared this might backfire. I'm currently hoping she'll grow out of it, and despite their attempts with leaflets etc. to encourage attendance at other Christian activities out of school, we've not allowed this.

Similarly for Religious Observation, I was offered an opt out by the headmistress, but I felt that the school was failing to offer any acceptable alternative provision. The head teacher also wouldn't tell me how many other children were currently opting out, claiming this was confidential. With critical mass, I feel they would have to consider offering a proper alternative to Christian Religious Observation, or even reducing the Christian content of the 'all school' Religious Observation. I fear that I didn't want my daughter to be stigmatised as part of a tiny minority being opted out.

What information was provided to help you in this decision?

Very little information was given particularly as to the nature of any alternative provision. Given the circumstances I feared that any alternative provision would be poor, that my child would be disadvantaged, and would feel left out from 'whole school' activities.

Were you actively discouraged from opting out in any way?

Not actively discouraged, but the lack of information about the alternative that would be offered if I opted her out, and my assumption that very few children would be opting out led me to conclude it was a poor alternative. The head teacher did little to alter my view.

What action did you take afterwards?

I considered taking a complaint to the council, but feared that since Religious Observation is Scottish Government policy, I wouldn't get very far.

Do you have any further comments to make on this matter in the light of our petition?

I think it's ridiculous in this day and age, and in our secular country with only a minority of people practising any form of religion that we appear to still have a state-sanctioned religion which has a special status in our schools. If I had my way there would be no Religious Observation in schools (like in the USA) and a much more balanced teaching of RME, from a multi-faith and secular perspective. In fact why not teach philosophy instead?

However, I see the idea of switching from an opt out to an opt in as being a very



good start. It's a way of making the schools be more upfront with parents about what they are actually doing when it comes to Religious Observation. An opt in system might also prevent parents sleepwalking into the default option of Christian Religious Observation, and perhaps result in a critical mass of parents and children requiring a non-religious (or at the very least non-Christian) alternative assembly, which would force schools to take the provision of this seriously, or look at providing Religious Observation that was acceptable to many faiths and none. Paragraph of the Scottish Government policy guidance does state:

"Religious observance needs to be developed in a way which reflects and understands this diversity. It should be sensitive to our traditions and origins and should seek to reflect these but it must equally be sensitive to individual spiritual needs and beliefs, whether these come from a faith or non-faith perspective."

I think currently that my daughters' school is failing in their duty to properly cater for the non-faith perspective which is held by many of the parents I speak to. Your campaign has my full support, and I wish you the best of luck. Please don't hesitate to get in touch if I can help in any way with your efforts.

RDA July 2013

Testimony #6 Statement of Support from a Deputy Head Teacher

Another comment supporting our petition comes from a Deputy Head Teacher at a primary school who is also responsible for the delivery and design of Religious Observation in his school.

He writes, "Although we have developed the religious aspects of our Religious Observation events to be an 'opt-in' activity (the children are invited to pray by the school chaplain, for example, if they wish to do so) I am aware that many schools still operate with the 'opt-out' policy of which parents are not aware. I am also aware that some schools make the decision, deliberately or otherwise, to actively promote Christianity. Non-denominational should be exactly that.

In my school, the Religious Observation group has also changed the terminology and do not use 'Religious Observance' where the children are concerned. This is in line with recent guidance to Directors of Education and Head Teachers (2011). We have 'Let's Think About...' events which are wholly inclusive and meaningful to all, children and staff alike. If we have stimulus, guided reflection and a response, we have a Religious Observance event. I consider Red Nose Day in school to be an Religious Observation event without either religion or observation.

Religious and Moral Education is of vital importance in schools, perhaps more so now than at any other time.

The issue lies when the faith stance of many parents is not being considered, or at least not taken seriously, when delivering Religious Observation **and** I am certain that many parents with no faith are totally unaware of what is being asked of their children. I know of one school's assembly policy which states that assemblies 'promote the beliefs of Christianity and other world religions' with an objective to 'learn about God and be open to the teachings of the Christian Church' and an aim of developing the children's 'relationship with God'. This, in a non-denominational school!

Religious faith is a private matter. Religious Observance should not be enforced on children. Schools should educate, not indoctrinate and for these reasons, I wholly support the petition co-authored by Secular Scotland and Mark Gordon to amend the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 to make Religious Observance in Scottish public schools an 'opt-in' activity."

KOH July 2013

Testimony #7

A Student's Testimony

A case in point would be that of a 20 year old philosophy student at Edinburgh University and former pupil of Alloa Academy. He tells a harrowing tale of Religious Observance being forced upon him in his final years at school.

"I didn't agree with being forced to endure Religious Observation and decided I would make a stand and leave assemblies where Religious Observation was involved. There was one assembly when I was apprehended by the deputy head while walking out. She told me that I had to stay in by law and I was threatened with a written warning. I was rather terrified of being thrown out of school and was belittled for not wanting to attend.

This was plainly against the law."

DH June 2013

Testimony #8 A Parent's Testimony

Brief summary of why you sought assistance.

I didn't want my children to have religious instruction at school and had tried to find a secular school before finally enrolling my son in a local catholic school because I was unable to find a school which didn't teach about religion. I was unaware at the time that there were none.

I had spoken to the head teacher and told her of my wishes before enrolling my son there. It was agreed that he would not participate in prayers or attend any form of religious ceremony. The head teacher also claimed to be sympathetic to my wishes which gave me the confidence to go ahead. I thought that he and I could talk about anything which came up, but I felt that the teachers were having more influence over his view of belief in god so I decided to search for a solution. It was then I found the contact details for the Humanist Society and got in touch.

What was the area of concern Religious and Moral Education (RME), Religious Observance (Religious Observation) or both?

Both.

What aspects of Religious Observance (or RME) prompted you to discuss the matter with the school?

I believe that there is no need to introduce children to this kind of subject at the young age they are normally exposed to it and that children are deliberately introduced at primary school because they are easily led at this stage. I also believe that religious belief is a personal matter which is based on faith, not fact and for these reasons should not be part of a school curriculum. I want my children to make the choice for themselves when they are old enough to consider the subject in their own time.

Who did you discuss it with?

As I said earlier, I discussed my wishes with the school head teacher who assured me that my wishes for my son's education would be respected.

Were you aware at the time of your right to opt out?

No, I was not.

Are you aware now?

Yes.

How did you find out about your right to opt out?

I found out when I contacted the Humanist Society to help me find a school which did not insist on teaching religion.

What does the School Handbook say about this now?

I checked the school handbook which was given to me when I enrolled my daughter two years after enrolling my son and noticed that there is mention of the fact that parents are able to opt their children out of RE and Religious Observation. I was not notified of this at the time I enrolled my son and I haven't seen the handbook recently.

Did you decide to opt-out and why?

I decided to opt my son out after speaking to the Humanist Society. I contacted them in the first place because I felt I was unable to discuss the subject with him properly because he seemed to be more influenced by his teacher. The last straw was when I found him trying to teach his sister how to bless herself.

What information was provided to help you in this decision?

The Humanist Society of Scotland showed me the government guidelines on opting children out and the requirement of the school to provide adequate alternatives to RE and Religious Observation.

Were you actively discouraged from opting out in any way?

When I first approached the head teacher about it, she said it was fine since it was my right to do so, but the education department told me that I was allowed to opt my son out of Religious Observation, but I was NOT allowed to opt him out of RE. When I tried to point out that the government guidelines said I WAS allowed to opt him out, I was cut short and told that I wasn't, that the matter was with their legal department, and that when they came back with their decision, I could then decide whether or not I wanted to mount a legal challenge to that decision. I pointed out that this sounded like it was believed that the decision had already been made in favour of the school and education department but this was denied. In the end, they were forced to concede but it was clear that they were not at all happy about it.

What suitable alternative provision was made for your child when he or she was not present at Religious Observance (or RME)?

It was put to me that my son would complete any unfinished work from class, but I was against this as I thought it might appear that he was being picked on and that it also gave him the impression that he had extra time to do classwork, which was something I did not want to encourage. It was made VERY clear though that there

would be no agreement to use the books recommended by the Humanist Society.

I offered to go into the school to cover one of his lessons each week and that I would decide on what to do with him during that time. Now, he and his sister do some research work topics they are working on in class. I am happier with this arrangement.

Where was this carried out? Classroom? School office?

It is carried out wherever there is a free room or space to do it. Unfortunately, twice when I went to the school with lunches for my children, I found my son unattended at the main entrance, kneeling on the floor to enable him to lean on a seat to do his work. I spoke to the head teacher and brought this issue up with the education department's legal team through a lawyer, but they have tried to claim that this was just a one off. I personally found my son in this situation twice, which clearly means it could not be a one off and Amie told me that it has happened to her too. They have not taken this seriously enough and this has still not been resolved. Instead of seeing this as a serious matter, the legal department have tried to ignore it and pass it off as unimportant.

Who carried this out? A teacher or someone else?

As I said, I did it sometimes, but mostly it is a teacher or a classroom assistant.

Were you satisfied with the alternative provision given to your child? Did you feel your child was disadvantaged in any way on account of opting out?

I wasn't satisfied at first but I am happier with the present arrangement as I feel it is fun and at the same time worthwhile for the children.

Did opting out resolve the issues or did they worsen? What was the end result?

Initially, things were ok but worsened in October 2010 when there was a major issue with the school and the education department because they forced me to accept my children participating in religious lessons disguised as 'valuing diversity'. I am also a little concerned that my children are not necessarily always being treated fairly. Once, Amie complained after school, that she had blisters on her fingers. I asked how this happened and she told me that whilst the other children were in RI lessons, she had been told to sharpen all the pencils in the class. The following day, both her and my son were told to clean the library during RI. Again, this was brushed aside with the school claiming that Amie had not been asked to sharpen ALL the pencils, just a few and that they had just been asked to help put away some books and so on in the library.

It is difficult to find out what the actual truth is, but I feel that the school always play these incidents down, which is very frustrating.

Were any other steps necessary?

I had to go to a lawyer because Renfrewshire Council's legal department got involved due to the head teacher lying to them about things I was supposed to have said to her in a private meeting about them being taken to watch the pope arriving in Scotland on TV.

Were you aware of this petition? If you were aware did you sign it?

I was not aware of it and therefore did not get the opportunity to sign it. Had I known I would definitely have signed it.

Any further comments:

The education department have shown no interest in investigating my complaint against the school, but have accepted the school's version of events without question. The Legal Aid Board didn't feel that I was due legal aid to help me in my attempts to get justice, despite the fact that the education department and the school were utilising Renfrewshire Council's Legal team to bully me into accepting their brushing aside of my legal rights. My lawyer appears to feel that there isn't really anywhere she can go with it and has pretty much given up. This is a very unsatisfactory state of affairs.

It seems that the Education Department feels like they can get away with whatever they like by ignoring facts. Every attempt to have them deal with the issues which have arisen has resulted in them brushing them aside as unimportant. Even the issue of my children being left unattended at the main entrance to the school during RI was not enough to raise any concern from them.

Right now, I am very unhappy with the situation and still want to take it further, but I am unsure of exactly how to approach it. I had hoped the Humanist Society would lend their weight to my argument, but unfortunately, they claim that they are unaware of any parents having problems opting their children out of RI, which I find hard to believe. This leaves me very much on my own. My next move would probably be to approach my MP or the Education Department at the Scottish Parliament though I'm not sure either would be very fruitful.

GM August 2013

Testimony #9

A Parent's Testimony

When you were preparing to send your child to school for the first time what concerns did you have?

I was concerned that a minister that has access to the school holds views opposing equality of marriage, and has stated a desire to influence teaching of information to children that would include information about sexuality and relationships. This would appear to be in opposition to Falkirk council's commitment to promote sexual equality.

What was the area of concern Religious and Moral Education (RME), Religious Observance (Religious Observation) or both?

Religious influence in the school, via assemblies and church services at Easter, harvest, Christmas etc., from people who are opposed to sexual equality.

Why did you decide not to opt out?

I did not want my daughter to be confused at that age as to why she has to go to do something different from the other children. I have weighed up the pros and cons of opting her out of religious observance, but decided reluctantly that it is in her best interests not to be segregated from her friends.

What does the School Handbook say about this?

The school handbook states: *Parents who wish to exercise their right to withdraw their child from religious instruction and / or observance should contact the head teacher, in writing, and alternative arrangements will be made for your child.* I think this is reasonably clear.

Were you satisfied with the alternative provision that could be offered to your child? Did you feel your child would be disadvantaged in any way on account of opting out?

I don't know what options the school provides, or how many children take this option. There is no information available without directly asking the school. I think that there should be more information provided in advance what the alternative options are. Then many more parents may avail of this. At the moment, it is hardly publicised that opting out is an option and you have no idea who or where the children will be looked after, and what else they will miss from not being at assembly. I believe assembly is an important time in the child's day and would only opt out of it if I could have confidence she was not missing out on anything else.

Were you aware of this petition? If you were aware did you sign it?

Yes, I have signed it.

PH

August 2013

Appendix 2 - Sample of E-petition comments

This proposed change is a logical and fairer method for both believers and non-believers and offers parents a wider choice of their personal wishes.

Opt in offends no one.

Schools are there to educate, not to proselytise. Pupils should have the option to decide to go to services, but not be expected to go by default. The worrying and shocking emergence of Creationism and science-deniers in our education system is a source of great concern and should be redressed sharply.

My kids have been bullied because we did opt out. Education should be about facts.

Over 20 years ago my parents supported me in opting out of religious observance. I was the only one at the school to do so and had to sit outside the headmaster's office, in the place where kids due to be disciplined normally sat. attendance at any religious ceremonies in a secular society should only ever be by a positive choice - i.e. opt in.

It is absurd that schools still have this, often opt out is not mentioned almost like a not asked don't tell situation, children that are removed from observance are made to feel outcast by the school and made fools off. Parents I know don't want the observance, however don't opt out as it is less stressful for the child who would otherwise be made to feel excluded. Enough is enough.

I walked into a local school one afternoon on business and found 100 young dancing, singing and clapping to a Kidz Club Evangelical Church group who I discovered go into every primary school in town once a week and perform a cutesy style encouraging kids to be 'saved'. Scary. I know their background - they are fundamentalist, miracle believing, signs and wonders worshipping church who encourage children to come to their 'Kidz Club' after school. Parents just don't know the depth of the belief of these people and it's hard to say no to their children. This has no place in school.

Very happy to support this - and I'm a Catholic.

Faith develops within the individual and is personal. Like wise the choice of where and when it is expanded and re-enforced is also a personal choice.

Seems like an ironic law, my reading of the gospels is that Jesus didn't make anyone do anything. On the contrary, he welcomed children and encouraged personal choice and responsibility. Also, church tends to flourish when it is on the margins of and serving society so ending this law might be good for Christianity too? The discussion is particularly interesting in a Scottish context since an emphasis on education was a distinctive of the Scottish reformation, again, it seems odd that Christianity has now become entangled in the education system in this way. If there is to be Religious Observation in schools in a predominantly non church attending country, opt-in sounds fair to me.

I have a simple test of fairness: turn things around. If they're still fair, fine. So let's apply this test. Assume all children are to be pro-actively taught that no gods exist. Religious

parents can choose to have their children singled out to walk out of the class before the lesson, with everyone looking at them. Would religions think that was acceptable?

It should absolutely be an opt in if schools are going to be used as places of worship, there is no reason to presume it is alright to preach to children about any faith. Teach don't Preach.

Still recall the moment of clarity when, as a child in a church for a school service, I decided not to bow my head and pray - as we had all been led to do - and rather looked up and around and in silence observed for myself what was happening. I am completely in favour of RME, but would prefer Religious Observation was not part of school education. The faithful can pray in church or similar institutions as appropriate. This petition however, is perhaps more likely to be successful.

This is a progressive decision that acknowledges the rights of parents over their child's education. Parents of faith who have children can decide the level and what type of religious education their children receive. Likewise, parents of no faith can safeguard their children from enforced inculcation and proselytizing.

I've seen at first hand how invited visiting pastors and extremist sects can use school assemblies for their own ends - preaching eschatological nonsense and telling students they will be going to Hell if they don't follow their belief system and sect. It is clearly unregulated and can amount to propaganda and, at worst, serious abuse.

It is important that children learn about religion but this should be in an unbiased way and all beliefs should be treated equally. Having any religious observance in this way amounts to endorsing one religion over another and is completely inappropriate in a secular country like Scotland.

I am an ex-pat Scot currently living in Australia. Scotland should be taking the lead on encouraging a secular society. Religion has no place in politics and should not be part of Scotland's enviable education system. Please act to remove the influence of religious bodies on all state-funded schools.

Covering up the opt out certainly happened in my time at school in the 80s. I was brought up in a secular family and have always opposed religion being rammed down my throat. This of course brought me into conflict with the school authorities. Particularly when I tried to duck out. Considering one option for evading religious dogma was corporal punishment, I would consider that to be bullying. My school would have better used resources finding a replacement maths teacher for the year we missed out, than chasing pupils who 'opted out' of the walk to church at every Christian holiday. It was unacceptable in the 80s to force people to participate in something they have no belief in. It is unacceptable now. Opting in would mean my experience would not be repeated.

We live in a country that our politicians say prides itself on its multiculturalism and freedoms. Why should children have to feel like pariahs because their parents are one of the few to actually go to the bother (or be aware of the right) of having them opt out? The state should not be forcing religious indoctrination on the youngest, most pliable minds in society in a place they are led to believe is a source of truth.

There are so many areas of life for children to learn about. Why, in an increasingly secular society, do schools waste time on religion? There are not enough hours. Choosing to take a

child out of religious education stigmatises that child. The present system is unfair and unreasonable.

There are so many areas of life for children to learn about. Why, in an increasingly secular society, do schools waste time on religion? There are not enough hours. Choosing to take a child out of religious education stigmatises that child. The present system is unfair and unreasonable.

The religious population in Scotland is an ageing and increasingly irrelevant one. Religious observance should in no way still be the default position taught in schools. It's a backwards tradition and one that should end now.

Well done to Secular Scotland for raising this awareness .

Personally I would go further. I don't want religion inflicted on children in schools even at their parents' wishes.

I went to a school that taught religion, as if it were absolute fact, the ideas that were foisted on young minds, were often frightening, and damaging. I don't think that anyone, schools, parents or religious groups have the right to impose their beliefs on children. If adults choose to believe, that their choice, but they should be able to come to that decision, with a mature mind

Teaching children about other peoples beliefs is an important and noble thing for the education system to do, but the state should be secular and faith personal. Pressuring a child into Christian worship is wrong, and though not the intent an opt-out system does just this.

I would like to opt out, but I don't know of any parents who do (regardless of their beliefs) so I don't want my children to have to be treated differently. I'd rather there wasn't religious observation at all.

Opting out of something you aren't actually told will happen - and try getting accurate information out of a four-year-old about what goes on at school - is not an appropriate level of choice.

As a Jewish child, I was compelled to attend Christian worship at my school and always found it profoundly uncomfortable. It was the beginning of a system which Othered people from non-Christian faiths. I am now an atheist, and I still find the idea that this secular country compels children to join in religious worship appalling.

Excellent Idea.

Education is about knowledge, not belief or opinion. Schools should be built on a secular foundation. Religion should be a personal thing, for the home and church. More than happy to have religion feature as an element of history, modern studies, social science but the place for observance is church and the choice should be entirely personal.

I was not aware of this possible change. I'm not against my kids going to Religious Observation in principle, but I think that you should have to choose to go to a religious event, rather it just assumed that you will.

Appendix 3

Content of School Handbooks An Analysis

Author: M Gordon

Data collection: M. Gordon & P. Sanderson

Abstract

An informal survey of school handbooks online was carried out by the author in July and August of 2013. The data obtained is at the appendix. The data was gathered from 113 schools over 3 separate education authority regions – Aberdeen City Council, Angus Council and Inverclyde Council. Each handbook was examined to see if there was a statement contained within which made explicit the parental right to opt out of Religious Observance (Religious Observation) and the parental right to opt out of Religious Education (RME). It was also noted if there was a distinct Christian bias to the school. (This was determined on the basis that Christian churches or clergy were named as part of the school's pastoral team or if the text itself demonstrated such an approach.)

The results are summarised as follows:-

Education Authority	Sample Size	Explicit RME Opt Out Statement.	Explicit Religious Observat ion Opt Out Stateme nt.	Explicit RME Opt Out Statement %	Explicit Religious Observatio n Opt Out Statement %	% with Christian perspective
Aberdeen City Council	11	2	3	18.18%	27.27%	100.00%
Angus Council	61	57	57	93.44%	93.44%	100.00%
Edinburgh City Council	18	13	14	72.22%	77.77%	100.00%
Inverclyde Council	23	14	16	60.86%	69.56%	91.30%
TOTALS	113	86	90			
AVERAGES				76.11%	79.65%	97.89%
AVERAGES weighted for sample size				61.18%	67.01%	97.83%

Relevant text was also captured and can be found in the data.

When the data is weighted to equalise sample size in each region the influence of poorer performing regions can be seen more clearly.

The main finding is that there is great variability in the data with a low of 27% at



Aberdeen City Council to 93% at Angus Council. This no doubt is due in some part to the level of coordination at authority level. We also find that the vast majority of schools have a distinct Christian character. This is unsurprising.

It is possible that some of the handbooks have not been updated since the introduction of the 2012 legislation which mandated that parental rights to opt out should be discussed. It was also noted that a significant number of schools did not appear to provide access to a school handbook online.

One other item of note is that of the two schools that were proud to state that they were accredited by UNICEF as a 'Rights Respecting School' both did not give parents an explicit statement of their rights to opt out.

The author contends that the data summarily dismisses the assertion that the right to opt out is in every school handbook in the land.

Mark Gordon
August 2013

Full data collected is available on request from the Scottish Secular Society

Appendix 4 – Article from Prestwick’s “Going Out” magazine describing Prayer Spaces in Schools

Prayer Space

At the initiative of teachers and school chaplains, and with the help of volunteers from Prestwick churches, children of Kingcase Primary School were given the opportunity of making use of a Prayer Space in the school for one week. A room was set aside to provide different activities in line with Curriculum for Excellence, coming under the heading of Health and Wellbeing, Spiritual Dimensions. The Prayer Room was accessed by all children throughout the week, the volunteers helping them to learn to focus on such areas as forgiveness. For example, this prayer was in a visual form where the children dropped a small piece of fizzing tablet into a jar of water and asked for forgiveness for a particular situation that they had been involved in, they watched the tablet dissolve and knew their wrong doing was disappearing with it. In another area of the room they wrote their prayer down on a stone and put it in a bucket of water, having been taught that God takes our confessed wrongs and throws them in a lake which has a sign which says, 'No Fishing!' In the centre of a room a tent was erected with bean bags in where the children could go and spend a while thinking and talking to God in quiet. Children from every year took part in this venture. Their questions and openness with God was amazing. In one area a cross was erected where they formed the characters they loved out of plasticine and left them at the cross for God to care for. The whole week was well received by children and teachers alike.



*Learning to pray for others – Justice in the world.
The map shows how Fair Trade working in
countries around the world to do just that.*



*Children wrote their prayers
and posted them on a prayer wall*