

The Convener  
Petitions Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
EH99 1SP

16<sup>th</sup> September 2013

Dear Convener,

## RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

We wish to make some points to the Petitions Committee in light of the recent call to change the arrangements for Religious Observance (RO) in schools to make it an opt-in activity for parents.

In Scotland there are relatively few areas of the curriculum which are directly determined by primary legislation. Most are determined by National Guidelines and accepted practice. The nature of the curriculum in any given school is set by the head teacher within the guidance provided by the Local authority and evaluation by HM Inspectorate of Education.

However Religious Observance and Religious Education are required in schools by primary legislation and for good reasons. Among these are:

- The need for young people to understand the Christian history and tradition of Scotland which reaches back almost 2000 years.
- The importance of understanding the direct connection between Scotland's Christian heritage and its political and social institutions. It is no exaggeration to say that the social justice and personal freedoms we enjoy in Scotland are derived in large measure from our historic Christian worldview.
- Young people should have the opportunity not only to learn about our Christian heritage but to be able to experience first-hand something of its richness and personal inspiration, as well as actively engaging with the great spiritual questions of our existence.
- Young people should also have the opportunity to become aware of the diversity of religious experience and expression in Scotland and in the wider world, as well as its personal and societal significance.
- Religious Observance as currently practised in schools encourages this wide spiritual development of young people and does not require an exclusively Christian content or commitment. Indeed, in the last few years many schools have developed imaginative approaches to RO which draw from various religious traditions and none. It does not compel any particular religious position. RO is, however reflective, rather than didactic as is the case for Religious Education (RE). It also focuses on life values such as respect, justice, equality and personal responsibility.

- Reflection on the spiritual and the transcendent in RO gives pupils an experience of a reality which is not available elsewhere in the curriculum. Pupils would be significantly poorer, intellectually and emotionally, without it.

Over the last decade or so, Religious Observance has been the subject of guidance in Scottish Government Circulars and advice from Education Scotland. The latest guidance from the learning Directorate of The Scottish Government on the matter is dated 21<sup>st</sup> February 2011. As a result of these publications and the associated work of a number of bodies with interests in the area, the practice of RO in both primary and secondary schools has been dramatically developed in creative and contemporary ways. The current expressions of RO in schools are diverse and personally engaging in ways that are not only accessible but spiritually enriching to young people. The current system is inclusive, works well, and is enjoyed by the pupils and students.

In addition, there are many groups, including EA members and representatives of the major Christian denominations, who are actively engaged in RO in schools, in line with current guidance. They deliver RO in a professional and sensitive manner, respecting the diverse background of the young people involved. These contributions are welcomed by schools and the diminishing of RO will cause great disappointment and frustration to scores of parents, pupils and volunteers who are committed to supporting the work of schools.

The proposal to adopt an opt-in system will have the impact of denying large numbers of pupils an opportunity for spiritual exploration and development. Many parents may not feel strongly about the matter and will be guided by the preferences of their young people, who are unlikely to want to opt into a curricular experience which is not obligatory. Peer pressure is likely to play a significant part in their decision. The present opt-out system gives proper protection to a minority of parents who do not wish to have their children engage in RO. That number has been consistently very low.

We ask you, therefore, to consider that the petition by Secular Scotland will have the effect not of respecting the wishes of a minority but of denying, by default, a life-enriching experience to a majority of pupils.

We cannot escape the conclusion that the petitioners, Secular Scotland, are committed to the removal of the religious dimension from public life. We argue that this is entirely inconsistent with the massive religious heritage of Scotland which ought to be known and celebrated by its young people, even by those who may not make any personal commitment to it. At the very least they should be aware of what it is they are rejecting.

We would be happy to give evidence on this matter to the Petitions Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Rev Dr Fred Drummond  
National Director  
Evangelical Alliance, Scotland