

PE1487/D

Dundee & Tayside Humanist Group Letter of 30 September 2013

FAO – Mr David Stewart MSP, Convener, Public Petitions Committee, The Scottish Parliament

Dear Mr Stewart,

As the Convener, on behalf of the Dundee & Tayside Humanist Group, we offer comment in support of the subject petition. Our support also has direct reference related to the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, which in turn emanated from the United Nations Charter on Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

I was one of the three humanists in the group which, in July, responded to the Education and Culture Committee on the UNCRC, and Secular Scotland's subject petition has great merit in that it not only speaks of autonomy, equality and rights of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, but also addresses some of the concerns in that response. **The attached with highlights shows where that applies.**

The proposed Opt In policy will ensure that those rights are assured.

Thank you.

Ronald McLaren
Convener, Dundee & Tayside Humanist Group

FAO:

**Education and Culture Committee
Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill
Call for written evidence**

Submission for the Scottish Parliament, July 2013 (Following submission from Humanist Society Scotland, September 2012)

From three concerned humanists:

Paul Braterman, Ron McLaren, Clare Marsh,

1. We welcome the proposed introduction of this new bill and hope it will provide for children, the rights which have so far been largely ignored. We propose to limit our comments to those which directly affect the rights of the child, as outlined in Article 14 of the UNCRC.

Article 14

1. States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
2. States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.

2.'CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE - PROVISION OF RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE IN SCHOOLS' states:

“.....we can expect Scotland to become increasingly diverse in the range of faith and belief traditions represented. Religious Observance needs to be developed in a way which reflects and understands this diversity. It must be sensitive to individual spiritual needs and beliefs, whether these come from a faith or non-faith perspective.”

The Review Group on Religious Observance speaks of Religious Observance as both an individual and communal activity, providing the opportunity for individual reflection on what the core beliefs and values of their community mean to them as individuals, and how they can contribute and are influenced by them. However, in much of the primary sector, many schools simply ignore this. A single religion is practised as the one true and/or locally predominant faith, excluding all others, involving a religious minister/priest or cleric who presides over a specific religious service in a whole school assembly. We see that as contrary to the awareness and acceptance of the diversity that we seek.

3. 'CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE - PROVISION OF RELIGIOUS AND MORAL EDUCATION IN NON-DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOLS and RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN ROMAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS' states:

“Education about faith and belief in non-denominational schools, and education about faith in denominational schools contributes to the development of the whole person, allowing children and young people to consider, reflect upon and respond to important questions about the meaning and purpose of existence.” The Scottish Joint Committee on RME or RMPS tells us that schools have been asked to move away from the confessional approach but **school chaplaincy teams abound with faith representatives and lack non religious balance.**

Some primary schools invite the Bible Bus to park in the playground to distribute bibles and some distribute CD-ROMS produced by the Jesus And Me Trust which teaches creationism. * nb East Kilbride - Kirktonholme Primary etc !

4. Government guidelines advise:.....**parents have a statutory right to withdraw children from participation in religious and moral education and religious education in both non-denominational and denominational schools.**

and

“Where a child or young person is withdrawn, schools should make suitable arrangements for them to participate in a worthwhile alternative activity.” Schools should not be allowed to impose demeaning tasks, or treat opted-out children as if they were being subjected to discipline. **Many parents contact non religious organisations to complain that their school continues to teach one religion as the only true one. Some tell us of the obstructionist approach adopted by schools to their requests for their child to opt out and no suitable activity is offered.** We are told that children are left to sit in a corridor reading a book, and, in one case, asked to sharpen all the pencils and tidy the classroom.

5. In a YouGov survey **of 1000 parents of school age children** (March 2012)
- only 4% said that schools should maintain the confessional approach and
 - **only 20% had been informed by the school of their right to withdraw.**

It would appear that **the problem of the absence of parental awareness of the provision to opt-out is confined mainly but not totally to the primary sector.** However, we are also told by parents of pupils in the secondary sector that **Intelligent Design is advocated by invited speakers,** despite the fact that it is completely contrary to the scientific consensus. The theory of evolution is incontrovertible, supported as it is by the weight of scientific evidence; the theory of I.D. is not.

Surely, in the interest of the children, it should be challenged on both scientific and philosophical grounds.

School staff who are sympathetic to requests for opt-out explain that they simply do not have an alternative, suitable curricular activity nor do they have the resources to provide a teacher. We have great sympathy with these schools and understand their problem. As a solution, we suggest that all schools, including those in the primary sector, move away from the confessional approach. It may be that some parents do not wish this to happen and if that is the case, then the local authority should provide the staffing and training to put in place, an alternative course of study based on philosophy and morality. Excellent course materials and training in their delivery already exist, provided by the education departments of our universities. When parents are enrolling their child, they can then be offered a choice of curriculum.

6. Children of a homosexual orientation need to be protected against the homophobic attitude prevalent in some schools

7. In the denominational sector, all schools ignore the aforementioned government guidelines. Alternative guidance issued to their staff in '*This is Our Faith*', pub. March 2011: reads: "Teachers should avoid presenting all denominations or faiths as equally true. There is no place for the explicit study of atheism or humanism". It also appears that RME in these schools is interpreted to include not only religious issues as such, but human relationships as well, including selective factual matters of sexual health, favouring abstinence, a situation that has led to expressions of concern by the NHS, and to the promulgation under the auspices of the schools' RME programme of damaging disinformation about the efficacy of condoms against conception and STD's (see Times Educational Supplement Scotland, 21 June 2013)

That is in direct opposition to the Scottish Government's policy on human relationships education and to that cited by government ministers. In Nov 2011, Dr Alasdair Allan MSP, Minister for Learning and Skills said: "RME is not indoctrination; pupils should decide their own stances on faith, morality etc and this is true in denominational as well as in non-denominational schools."

We fully agree with Dr Allan and hope that the new law will ensure that in a progressive inclusive Scotland, all children and young pupils will be given this right.

8. Many parents have contacted us over the last few years to ask for our help. They would be more than willing to give oral evidence to the committee.