

## **Education without religion**

### **A Humanist perspective**



## **Support for Parents and Learners**



## **First of all.....YOU ARE NOT ALONE !**

Here are some quotes from some of the many parents and learners who have contacted us:

*"The religious agenda started on day one. From the very first, one of two things happened; either the children had to pray or they had to declare themselves different from everyone else."*

*"Children necessarily must invest the sincerest trust in what their teachers tell them. Thus the same institution that tells them one plus one equals two should not then be telling them how three persons add up to one God."*

*"We want our children to understand the Christmas and Easter stories and Ramadan, Eid, Diwali, Chanukah and Beltane. We want them to know that there are many ways to be a good person and you don't have to believe in a god to be good, honest, decent and trustworthy. We hope the school will not undermine these beliefs."*

*"I was worried about creating a fuss, but now I've talked to the school, the teachers are careful to support my wishes."*

*"I am glad that we are aware of what is right and wrong and are able to voice our opinions to the school. I worry that many of our friends and colleagues from different cultures are not allowed to raise their children in their own beliefs and that they do not have the resources to speak out."*

*"Ever since I was 7 I knew the god stuff was all made up and I don't want any more. Now that I'm 16 the teachers still want me to go to assembly, probably because they don't know where to find alternatives...but now there are places where you can get that stuff."*

*"The Humanist Society was a great help to me. Once they had pointed me in the direction of the relevant legislation and guidelines then I felt I had the ammunition to fight my case."*

**All of these parents and learners have successfully addressed the issues in their best interests or in the interests of their children. You can also exercise your rights and we will be happy to support you.**



**This booklet is to help explain how the school system works, what your rights and choices are and how you can get a non-religious education for your child.**

## **RELIGION IN YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL LIFE**

There are some things schools have to do and some things schools choose to do.

### **Religious and Moral Education (RME)**

There is also a subject called “*Religious and Moral Education*” (RME) of which the religious component examines many of the main religions. This should in theory be carried out with no bias towards any particular religion and can include non-religious discussions or philosophy eg the rights and wrongs of theft. In Primary schools this is supposed to be 10% of teaching time, and in Secondary schools it falls to about 5%.<sup>1</sup>



### **Religious Observance (RO)**

Schools are expected to carry out at least six acts of “*Religious Observance*” (RO) each year. This is defined 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*”.<sup>2</sup> This could be anything from a church service to a school assembly.

### **Religious/Pastoral Visits**

Visits to places of religious worship and visits by religious representatives are a common feature of many schools especially at certain times e.g. Christmas, Easter, Harvest Festival, etc.

**You have the legal right to withdraw your child from any of these.**

**It may surprise you to know that this applies even if it is a ‘faith’ school (e.g. Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim).**

One concern most people share is the effect this will have on their child's education, and whether this will be a negative effect.

The Scottish Government Policy on Religious Observance in schools (Scottish Government Circular 1/2005 ) states that “***In no circumstances should a child be disadvantaged as a result of withdrawing...***”.

In Practice this means that suitable and appropriate alternative provision and/or activity should be made, as of right, and done in such a way as to avoid targeting or scapegoating.

## DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT TO WITHDRAW

First of all, it is easiest if you (parents/guardians and child) are all agreed on the way ahead. This booklet is intended to be a help in making this decision.

If you have agreed to withdraw your child, you should in the first instance contact the school, usually via the headteacher. You will probably be given a form to sign to confirm your wishes.

If you haven't yet decided, here are some things you might want to think about:

### THINGS TO ASK THE SCHOOL

- Ask for details of that part of the curriculum dedicated to Religious and Moral Education and seek assurances that it is broadly based and recognises both religious and non religious positions.
- Does the school have an appointed Chaplain?
- Does a faith leader (e.g. minister / rabbi / imam) have input into the school?
- If so: How many and to what extent are all views included? How often? Do they come into the class? Do they assist in assemblies? What are the purposes of such visits? How are they monitored? Who decides who will be invited?
- Is the school affiliated to a particular religion? Even if it is non-denominational, it may be affiliated to a local church / mosque etc.
- How often do they have RO and what format does this take e.g. assemblies, church visits, *'together time'*?
- What alternative activities will they provide for your child?
- Are children given the opportunity to investigate a full range of religious beliefs?
- Are children made aware that a person can be moral, ethical and non-religious?
- Are children given the opportunity to investigate non-religious beliefs?
- Do they have guidelines on their existing religious activities?
- Who is responsible for setting the policy?
- Who ensures the policy is adhered to?
- How are parents views sought/represented?

Schools might have written documentation on what they do for either RME or RO - you might want to read that and talk to the school about their approach. The school might have a website and these details may be posted on it. Many schools also have handbooks and it is important to read and, as appropriate, respond to or question the contents.



Schools might have worthwhile alternatives already planned. If they don't you can offer them the range of alternatives:

<http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/education/resources.html>

<http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk>

## **IF YOU ARE A PUPIL OVER 16 YEARS OF AGE**

As a person over 16 years of age you have the legal right to decide for yourself whether you wish to withdraw from RO and /or RME. You should first speak to your form / registration teacher about your choice and there will probably be a form from the school that you will have to sign to formally withdraw.

In the time you'll then have free from religion, your school should allocate other suitable activities. If they don't, there are lots of interesting resources for you (and your school) to make use of in the reference section at the end of this booklet.



## **DID YOU KNOW? FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **Under what laws do schools operate their policies and practice of religious education?**

The Legal framework of religious education in school comes from various Education Acts (1872, 1918, 1980) and also by various laws concerning human rights, equality and rights to information. How these acts are translated into the class is informed by circulars from the Scottish government, the most recent being issued in 1991 and 2005. (See references 1, 2)

### **Who is responsible for setting policies on RME and RO?**

Decisions will be made at several levels:

- The National, Scottish government level which will also involve national bodies such as Her Majesty's Inspectorate (Education).
- Council / Education Authority level.
- The school will likely have agreed policies on how RME / RO are conducted within the school, and may also have designed the materials used.
- The individual teacher is responsible for how class materials are used (and may also have written some of them). There may be several teachers who have contact with your child who may have religious input.
- The school's Parent's Forum / Parent Council may have input into decisions regarding religion within the school e.g. the level of religious involvement in RO assemblies.

### **Whom should I contact if I/we are unhappy with the current situation?**

If it is about something in a particular class, you may wish to contact the teacher informally, perhaps by letter, but the teacher may well refer the matter to a senior colleague and in many authorities the initial contact for a formal matter would, in the first instance, be to the head teacher who may pass the matter to a colleague with specific responsibilities for the topic that you are enquiring about.

For something outside the classroom, e.g. assemblies, then contact the school office and find out who is responsible for this part of the school's activities. If you're not sure who to talk to, the head teacher will be able to advise you. On whole school matters it is entirely appropriate to ask for a meeting with the head teacher. In such circumstances make sure you are well prepared and well informed. (Feel free to contact us for help and support beforehand.) Make sure that you have your concerns documented and in writing and that any responses should be confirmed in writing.



### **I'm not still not happy – what do I/we do next?**

You could bring it up at a Parent Council meeting to raise awareness with other parents and staff, and request a review of school policy.

The next stage would be to take the issue to the Director of Education for your local council.

Ultimately, as education is a devolved issue, you can take it to your local councillor, the councillor who chairs the committee responsible for education, your MSP and the Scottish Minister for Education.

### **Does my child need to go to assemblies/religious celebrations?**

No. You have a legal right to withdraw them from these. Some people feel they want to withdraw their child from anything to do with religion, whilst others may be happy for their child to be involved in the more 'cultural' aspects, e.g. Nativity/Christmas shows, Easter bonnet parades etc. You should agree the level that is right for you and so advise the school, making it clear that you expect appropriate alternative provision.

### **Can I prevent religious personnel coming into contact with my child while at school (e.g. classroom visits by ministers, priests, imams etc.)?**

Yes

### **The school is not providing any suitable alternative to RO/RME. What can I do?**

Contact the school, clarify your wishes and their obligation to make such provision and perhaps point them towards the range of alternatives provided by us .

<http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/education/resources.html>

<http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk>

### **My child is unhappy at being separated, how can I support her/him?**

Contact the school and find out what they will be doing instead and whether there are other children in their class / year also withdrawn. Also find out the relevant dates, so that you can discuss it with your child beforehand, make use of alternative materials at home.

Talk to your child about why they will be separate during this activity, and explain your thoughts. Make sure they are aware of what they are likely to be doing, and what the other children will be doing. Hopefully their activity will be more interesting!

Try to encourage your child to appreciate that being different can be a positive experience. For younger children you could play 'who's the odd one out' and choose things so you can say 'lucky you/me' for being the odd one out!



### **How can I present non-religious views to my child at home?**

Whether or not you decide to withdraw your child from RO, talking to them about other points of view is important. Discuss your views and beliefs, and try to explain why people have different beliefs, including non-religious ones. There are many materials available e.g. books and websites with ideas for questions, conversation topics and activities.

<http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/documents/3.html>

<http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/books.html>

<http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/>

### **I am worried my child will 'catch' religion from school / other children / clubs.**

It is always worth finding out exactly what goes on in your school by having a quiet word with the head teacher or designated member of staff before considering a complaint or withdrawing your child from worship, which you have the right to do. Many ordinary community schools have come a long way from the Bible story, hymn and prayer that used to be common, and you may well find that school assemblies usually consist of a moral story, an invitation to reflect on it, and general school business - all of which convey the school ethos and a sense of community.

### **I am concerned about being seen to 'rock the boat' at the school.**

Your child is important as is her/his education. The school is a means of providing education to your child – you pay the council, who pays the staff at the school so you are the client. As long as discussions are kept civil you will be seen to be a caring parent rather than an awkward one. If you can get involved in other areas of the school (e.g. helping with the school library) this could help. There is also the option of joining the Parent Council or PTA.

## WHAT WE CAN DO TO HELP YOU?

**Advice:** Contact our education officer at the address below or email directly at <http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/contact-us/contacts/education-officer.html>

**Support:** We have trained HSS members who will act as advocates for you, coming to meetings at the school or council to help support you.

## CONTACT US

**Email:** <http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/contact-us/contacts/education-officer.html>

**Or you can write to us at:**

Humanist Society of Scotland

272 Bath Street

Glasgow

G2 4JR

**Or telephone:** 0870 874 9002.

**Websites where you and schools can access free educational resources**

<http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/education/resources.html>

<http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk/>

## REFERENCES – WEBSITE ONLY

1. Circular 6/91 at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/149160/0039649.pdf>

(extract below)

- *For those parents who are unable to give their acceptance there is a statutory right to withdraw their children from religious education and a parallel right to withdraw their children from religious observance. These rights should always be made known to parents and their wishes respected.*
- *recommends a minimum of 10% of time for the curricular area of religious and moral education. (for primary)*
- *This recommends for the Religious and Moral Education Mode a notional minimum of 5% of curriculum time in S1 and S2, a minimum of 80 hours over 2 years in S3*



*and S4 and a continuing element within the context of personal and social development which should feature in the curriculum of all pupils in S5 and S6.*

2. Scottish office circular:  
CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE - PROVISION OF RELIGIOUS  
OBSERVANCE IN SCHOOLS 21 FEBRUARY 2011 at  
[http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/resources/c/genericresource\\_tcm4650443.asp](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/resources/c/genericresource_tcm4650443.asp)

(extract below)

### **Parental Right to withdraw**

14. There is a statutory provision for parents to withdraw children from participation in religious observance. This right should always be made known to parents and their wishes respected. Parents should be provided with sufficient information on which to base a decision.
  15. Scottish Ministers consider that religious observance complements religious education and is an important contribution to pupils' development. It should also have a role in promoting the ethos of a school by bringing pupils together and creating a sense of community. Schools are therefore encouraged to inform parents of this without applying pressure to change their minds.
  16. Where a child is withdrawn from religious observance, schools should make suitable arrangements for the child to participate in a worthwhile alternative activity. In no circumstances should a child be disadvantaged as a result of withdrawing from religious observance.
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3. Another circular : CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE -  
PROVISION OF RELIGIOUS AND MORAL EDUCATION IN NON-DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOLS  
and RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN ROMAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS  
can also be found on the same link

