

## **COLLECTIVE WORSHIP – *Briefing in support of the amendment of Baroness Massey of Darwen and others to the Education and Inspections Bill***

**Briefing from:** Association of School and College Leaders, British Humanist Association, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the UK, National Union of Teachers and the Sikh Education Council.

**The amendment is also supported by:** Hindu Council UK, which has circulated its own briefing.

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Inclusive assemblies can have great educational value, not least in building a collective ethos in bringing a school community together; they can contribute greatly to pupils' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development. Many schools provide such assemblies but the current law, which requires 'collective worship' is against them in this regard.

### **What does the law currently require?**

The most recent legal statement of the requirements for collective worship is contained in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. This builds on similar requirements in Section 346 of the Education Act 1996, the Education Reform Act 1988, and Section 25 of the 1944 Education Act, where the law on compulsory collective worship began. Section 70 of the 1998 Act states that, subject to the parental right of excusal or other special arrangements, "...each pupil in attendance at a community, foundation or voluntary school shall on each school day take part in an act of collective worship."

Schedule 20 to the 1998 Act gives more detailed information on the worship requirements. It notes the different practical arrangements that are allowed: "a single act of worship for all pupils or separate acts of worship for pupils in different age groups or in different school groups." A "school group" is defined as "any group in which pupils are taught or take part in other school activities".

In community schools, the head teacher is responsible for collective worship provision, in consultation with the governors. The majority of acts of collective worship in any given school term should still be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character".

### **Why is this a problem?**

The OFSTED review of secondary schools in England, 1993-1997 (published as *Secondary Education* in 1998) noted the widespread noncompliance with the requirements for collective worship and remarked that this "raises questions about the [1988] Act and its interpretation, and in particular whether schools in a broadly secular society can or should bring their pupils together in order to engage in worship. For Roman Catholic, Church of England and other denominational schools the answer is clear in principle. For most LEA and grant maintained schools, however, the notion of worship, and indeed that of prayer, can be problematic at both an institutional and a personal level."

This OFSTED review states that, in 1996/7, just over 70% of secondary schools showed evidence of non-compliance in collective worship.

A school community may do many things together but, lacking a shared religion, it cannot worship collectively. In requiring schools to do so, the law is incoherent. On the other hand, good educational assemblies can accomplish much.

There is widespread dissatisfaction over the current law and support for its reform. In 1998 there was a national consultation held by the Religious Education Council, the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education and the Inter-Faith Network which proposed reform based on a statutory requirement for regular assemblies of a spiritual and moral character in place of the present act of worship. Such a reform was supported not only by all the major teaching unions and by religious and secular groups such as the Methodist Church, the Buddhist Society, the British Humanist Association, the Sikh Education Council and the Board of Deputies of British Jews, but by parent and local government groups, and by professional RE associations such as the Professional Council for RE, the Conference of University Lecturers in RE and the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants.

### **What will the amendment accomplish?**

The amendment would straightforwardly replace the requirement to conduct 'collective worship' with a requirement to hold assemblies that will further pupils' 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural education' and guidance issued under the reformed law should ensure that assemblies take due consideration of pupils' religions or beliefs.

Teachers, including non-religious teachers, can and do use assemblies to demonstrate that moral values and responses to ultimate questions of existence can be inclusively framed on shared values found in our different religion and beliefs, building on the common ground of our humanity. A reform in the law would encourage this good practice.

If the law on worship and assemblies is changed, new guidance issued under the new law would doubtless contribute to a better sharing of good practice in the provision of inclusive and educational assemblies, and would represent a new entitlement for pupils that could command wide consensus – quite unlike the current requirement to provide 'collective worship'.

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