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November 18, 2010

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

Dear Mr Gove

We welcome your commitment to reducing bureaucracy in schools and scrapping unnecessary obligations on hard-pressed teachers. One such obligation, placed on all maintained schools in England, is to provide a daily act of 'broadly Christian' collective worship for their pupils.

This law impedes schools' ability to provide good inclusive assemblies and in practice the vast majority do not hold daily acts of collective worship, both because they lack space physically and in the timetable and because there are more effective ways of instilling shared values and a strong ethos in pupils.

Assemblies have a vital educational role – they can bring a school together in celebration of common values, and can assist pupils in exploring questions of purpose, value and meaning together. Teachers can and do deliver assemblies which are accessible, inspirational, and linked to the curriculum. These aims, however, are not best served by a law that forces schools to hold acts of 'reverence or veneration paid to a divine being or power'.

In addition, this law is a clear infringement of the right to freedom of belief as set out in the European Convention of Human Rights, forcing pupils to take part in worship regardless of what they personally believe. The parental right of withdrawal is not a satisfactory solution - most pupils cannot opt themselves out and children who are withdrawn may miss important aspects of the assembly or feel isolated from their classmates. Teachers too are often put in an invidious position, having to lead acts of worship which may not reflect their own beliefs. In addition the law is at odds with the new Equality Act, which includes religion and belief as a protected characteristic.

The removal of the compulsory nature of collective worship would not prevent faith schools from holding assemblies which reflect their religious character. It would simply mean that schools could decide for themselves what kind of assembly is best for their pupils, an approach which is entirely in keeping with the coalition government's stated principle of freedom for schools.

Teachers, parents and pupils – both religious and non-religious - have consistently opposed compulsory collective worship. We were not surprised that the idea of repealing the law quickly became one of the most popular suggestions when the 'Your Freedom' site launched earlier this year.

If the government wishes to repeal laws which needlessly restrict personal and professional freedom, then it is difficult to see why compulsory collective worship should not be one of the first to go. The forthcoming education bill provides a perfect opportunity to abolish this impractical and discriminatory law.

Yours sincerely

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