

Guidance for schools and academies on the right to withdrawal from Religious Education and Collective Worship

All Church of England schools and academies should strive for excellence in education, offering the best academic, social and pastoral training for all their pupils. Our schools are inclusive, welcoming all whether they and their families profess the Christian faith, another faith or none. However, they also seek to be distinctively Christian in their character, offering every child and young person a life-enhancing encounter with the Christian faith and the person of Jesus Christ. The life and relationships of the school should be underpinned by Christian values, without any attempts to proselytize.

Religious Education [RE] and Collective Worship [CW] are central to the life of our Church of England [CE] schools and academies. Both have an important role in building the distinctive Christian character and we sincerely hope that all pupils will take a full part in these. RE offers opportunities to explore the concepts and beliefs that lie at the heart of faith, Christian or otherwise. In our controlled schools teaching is based upon the Agreed Syllabus for RE from the local authority's Standing Advisory Council for RE [SACRE]. Aided schools and academies use the syllabus approved by the Governing Body in accordance with their Trust Deeds. Whatever the syllabus, teaching should cover a variety of faiths. The Statement of Entitlement for RE in CE Schools [National Society 2012] states that approximately 66% of curriculum time should be spent investigating Christian faith and 33% exploring other principle world faiths.

The Statement of Entitlement gives the aims of RE in CE schools as:

- To enable pupils to encounter Christianity as the religion that shaped British culture and heritage and influences the lives of millions of people today
- To enable pupils to learn about other major religions, their impact on culture and politics, art and history, and on the lives of their adherents
- To develop understanding of religious faith as the search for and expression of truth
- To contribute to the development of pupils' own spiritual and philosophical convictions, exploring and enriching their own faith and beliefs

Collective worship in all church schools should honour the school's trust deed and Christian foundations. Worship is central to school life, offering an opportunity for the whole community to explore the distinctive beliefs and narrative that underpin the school's Anglican foundations and distinctive Christian character. Together the school community can experience and participate in expressions of worship that are God centred, affirm Christian beliefs and yet remain inclusive and educational and are engaging, reflective, challenging and inspiring in a relevant way. Worship allows the school to celebrate its Christian values, vision and ethos and reflect upon their contribution to the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development of participants. It must be accessible to all members of the school community and value and honour every individual's unique contribution, regardless of age, gender, ability, background or beliefs. Worship is the responsibility of the governing body in conjunction with the Headteacher, working alongside staff and the local parish church.

Times of assembly are also important as they allow the school community to recognise and celebrate the beliefs and culture of others, particularly those represented in the school community, to celebrate achievement and to give notices. These times should be differentiated from worship.

The legal right of withdrawal

Those committed to CE schools which are distinctively Christian and have well taught RE and inclusive CW at their heart hope that no parents will wish to withdraw their children from these.

However, the 1944 Education Act, which integrated church schools into the state education system, gave the right to withdraw from RE or CW to parents who wished their children to receive a different form of RE or worship. This right was retained in subsequent acts with full clarification in Section 71 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and reiterated in more recent legislation. Government guidance for RE was updated in 2010, although that relating to CW has not altered since 1994. Parliamentary records show clearly that this right is intended as a conscience clause and is not, and never has been, a general opt out clause.

The legal position is that in all state funded schools, included voluntary controlled and aided, parents, carers, or pupils themselves in education post-16, have a legal right to withdraw their children from some or all RE lessons or acts of collective worship. The legal position with regard to academies is less clear as they are not mentioned in the legislation, but government guidance states ‘Under the terms of their funding agreement with the Secretary of State, all academies have to provide RE for all their pupils, except for those whose parents exercise the right of withdrawal.’ [DfE website, RE in academies 2.9.14] This strongly suggests that the right to withdrawal continues in academies.

[Subsequently, within this document, parents, carers and post-16 pupils are referred to collectively as parents. The word school is deemed to include academies]

RE forms part of every school’s basic curriculum and the 2002 Education Act restates that all schools must provide RE for all its pupils. The school curriculum is made up of those aspects of education that are the responsibility of the school to deliver and which are supported by parents – the National Curriculum; and those which are the responsibility of the parent and which the school supports – the basic curriculum. This includes RE and Sex and Relationships Education [SRE]. Parents have the legal right to withdraw their children from the basic curriculum but not from the National Curriculum. Schools may disapply special needs pupils from up to two National Curriculum subjects but not RE and SRE (or careers education). A parent cannot withdraw a child from any National Curriculum subject because they are studying a religious topic related to that subject, or for any other reason.

If a parent chooses to ask for their child to be wholly or partly excused from attending any RE lessons or times of worship their right must be respected and the school must comply. A school remains responsible for the supervision of any child withdrawn from RE, unless the child is lawfully receiving RE elsewhere. Parents do not need to explain their reasons for seeking withdrawal. They have a right to have their children religiously educated according to their wishes during the school day and a pupil may be withdrawn from the school premises to receive RE elsewhere, so long as the local authority [LA], or the governing body in aided schools or academies, is satisfied that this will not interfere with the child’s attendance at school other than at the beginning or end of any school session. Where reasonable these wishes should be met, but not at cost to the school or LA; or to the pupil’s attendance.

Dealing with requests for withdrawal

Even in church schools there will be a few parents who will object to any teaching about religion. We recognise that some parents may chose the church school ethos and yet wish their child to receive RE according to their own faith; while, particularly in rural areas, the church may offer the only local school available, although some parents would not have chosen to send their child to a CE school.

When faced with a request for withdrawal from either RE or CW it is very important that both school and parents fully understand the options the law allows. All schools have the responsibility to provide RE and CW for all pupils and to supervise pupils withdrawn by parents unless the child is lawfully receiving RE elsewhere. The time when the pupil is withdrawn is intended for the delivery of the basic curriculum for RE and not for the National Curriculum.

The use of the right to withdraw should be at the instigation of parents (or pupils themselves post-16), and it should be made clear whether it is from the whole or specific parts of RE and CW. A request should be made in writing. Although reasons need not be given it is very helpful if these are known when establishing

how the withdrawal time is to be handled. Parents have the right to choose whether or not to withdraw their child without influence from the school, although a school should ensure parents are made aware of the objectives and content of RE and of CW and are notified of their right of withdrawal so they can make an informed decision.

Alternative RE for withdrawn pupils could be provided at the school by someone from their religious group, or the pupil could visit another school where suitable RE is provided. When neither approach is practicable, other arrangements should be made to provide the pupil with the kind of RE that the parent wants.

Schools need to be clear that if a pupil is withdrawn in whole or in part from RE or CW and no arrangements involving outside intervention are made then the responsibility for what goes on when the pupil is withdrawn and under the supervision of the school lies ultimately with the parents. It is the parents who provide materials for their child. These should have clear outcomes and be connected to the faith or philosophy of the parents.

The law does not prescribe how religious education should be taught or organised in schools, provided the agreed syllabus or what is provided according to a trust deed is delivered, and that parents are enabled to exercise their rights of withdrawal. Particular care will be needed when RE is integrated with National Curriculum subjects from which there is no right of withdrawal. In this case the school will need to discuss the arrangements with parents to explore how the child's withdrawal can be best accommodated.

Ultimately it is the responsibility of the headteacher in negotiation with the parent to decide how a request for withdrawal will be managed and it is therefore a matter for whole school policy.

When a parent asks to withdraw their child from RE or worship the headteacher (possibly with the class teacher and/or RE co-ordinator) should discuss the request with the parent. The school should ensure the RE policies, Statement of Entitlement, syllabus and schemes of work are available and that parents understand the subject's aims and learning objectives. The rationale for collective worship alongside the themes and topics for the term should also be shared and parents should be given the opportunity to read these properly before discussing the information. The school's foundations should also be explained stressing the relevance of the distinctive character to all pupils and how the ethos is inclusive and respects personal beliefs. It is important to explain the repeated use of owning and grounding language, such as 'Christian believe that...' rather than any confessionalism.

To avoid misunderstanding the headteacher will find it helpful to establish the religious issues about which the parent would object their child being taught (although parents are not legally obliged to state their reasons). They should then discuss the practical implications of withdrawal and the circumstances in which it would be reasonable to accommodate parents' wishes.

The parent could be invited to observe a lesson, time of worship or visiting speaker or accompany a visit. This may provide reassurance that the approach being adopted is one of genuine open enquiry that respects the beliefs of all children.

When requests involve older pupils it may be helpful for them to be involved in the discussions.

When a parent still wishes to use the right to withdraw, but not to pursue any alternative provision for taught RE or for CW, the headteacher should explain who will supervise the pupil, where that supervision will take place and that the pupil should do work set by the parent to further educate their child in their own religious or world view. The work set will be monitored by the person supervising the pupil's withdrawal to ensure tasks set are completed but that the assessment of such work will be done by the parent. The headteacher must make it clear that the pupil will not be able to receive instruction in National Curriculum subjects during the time of withdrawal as this time is given over to a particular aspect of the school's basic curriculum, or to worship.

Parents also need to realise that there will be occasions when spontaneous enquiries made by pupils on religious matters arise in other areas of the curriculum and they have no right to withdraw their child from these, although the school should reassure the parent that such occasions will be handled with sensitivity. .

The school may also wish to review such a request each year, in discussion with the parents.

Likely reasons for withdrawal

In practice the most frequent requests for withdrawal can be summarised in two broad categories. The first are members of a particular faith group who wish their child to be withdrawn from all or specific elements of the RE curriculum or times of CW. The second are those from no faith background who wish their child to be withdrawn from RE and CW because they disagree with religion forming part of their child's curriculum or because they have strongly held beliefs against certain faith groups or cultures.

Requests for withdrawal very often arise out of a failure of inclusive views. RE is about exploring, learning about and learning from the views that are important to different groups, some of which must, of necessity, be different from those held by any one individual. While everyone has a right to their own beliefs, for RE to achieve its aims, there must be understanding of and respect for, other faiths and philosophies. This is why mutual understanding and discussion is so important as a prerequisite to discussions around withdrawal. The use of inclusive owning language such as 'Most Christians believe that... but Jehovah's Witnesses believe.....' is very useful when classes include members of other groups, provided that the teacher is sure that the facts they are stating are correct.

The law and guidance for each group is the same, but the approach may differ slightly.

a) Those from other faith groups

When discussing withdrawal with those from other faith groups there are likely to be specific areas of belief which concern parents and prompt a request for withdrawal. It is important that these are fully understood.

The majority of those requesting withdrawal in our schools are Jehovah's Witnesses [JWs]. Despite firm beliefs in the Bible as the inspired word of God, they differ from mainstream Christians in their beliefs about the Trinity. For them Jesus is not God incarnate, although He is God's son, his first born creation. The Holy Spirit is God's active force that he uses to accomplish his will, but not God Himself. For the most part they, like most people of faith, are happy to explore Christianity and other faiths in an educational manner which teaches the concepts at the heart of each faith and how these affects the lives of believers, and so most of the RE curriculum is accepted. There should be no problem in supporting the Christian values of the school or taking part when the Bible narrative is explored, but there are some key areas of disagreement particularly with the worship of CE schools. 2012 guidance for the Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist schools (SIAMS) requires CE school worship to enable participants to develop an understanding of Jesus Christ and of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, beliefs not shared by JWs. Most JWs choose not to join in the singing and prayer involved in worship, as the understanding and use of God's name may not be in accordance with their use of it, so they withdraw from this. In addition the Bible gives no indication that Jesus wanted his followers to celebrate his birth, particularly in a way that stresses the belief in his incarnation, so festivals, in particular Christmas, present a particular problem to JWs. The position is further complicated by the fact that the celebration of Christmas, and indeed of birthdays generally (which they do not celebrate), may not be limited to RE and CW. As already stated there is no right of withdrawal from other curriculum areas. When the headteacher is able to work with representatives from the community, including some of its leaders, to explain the school's approach to the subject and develop a relationship of trust, it should be possible to identify those aspects of RE and CW which parents are happy for the children to join and those from which the children would be withdrawn, and how issues around the wider curriculum are to be handled.

The same principle of frank discussion within the framework of the law holds when working with all religious groups. It may well be helpful for schools to seek guidance from religious leaders, especially when

there is a significant group of believers within the school community. They may well be able to support requests, suggest alternative tasks and bridges of understanding may result. Most other Christian groups join fully in all school activities but there may be specific issues such as Roman Catholic pupils not participating in an Anglican Eucharist. However some fundamental Christian groups may occasionally explore withdrawal from RE when studies concern another faith and such requests must be handled according to the guidance given.

Exclusive Christian Brethren always withdraw from both RE and CW, but are very happy to provide their own alternative provision and their lifestyle requires schools to make further concessions to their culture, but again discussion and understanding should enable them to be included within the school community.

Where those of other faiths explore the right to withdrawal discussion and understanding are again key, particularly in the area of CW. Most appreciate our distinctive position and values, but it is very important that what is taught about their faith in RE is educational and honours what they actually believe.

b) Requests from non-faith groups

In recent years an increasing number of atheists are exploring withdrawal for their children. Both the National Secular Society [NSS] and British Humanist Association [BHA] are strongly opposed to any publically funded religious schools, including CE ones, and both are actively campaigning to bring about their demise. However, they are prepared to compromise as the follow guidance suggests:

“Some Church schools cater for a diverse population and can be tolerant and welcoming to humanists. Religion may not be particularly emphasised, but you may have to put up with what there is (though you retain your rights to have your child excused from worship and RE). RE and Sex and Relationships Education may not be as objective or as broad as you would like, and school assemblies may be more overtly Christian than in a community school. But you may still feel that you can send your child to a religious school with a clear conscience, and that the family’s beliefs will be far more influential on the child anyway. Sending your child to the local school may have social advantages that outweigh the disadvantages.” [BHA website 1.9.14]

While generally supporting the opportunity to consider philosophical and fundamental questions, and learn about each other’s beliefs and values that are offered within RE, these groups are strongly opposed to the statutory requirement for worship that is mainly Christian in character in state schools, and campaign for inclusive assembly based on ethics. Both encourage parents to explore their right of withdrawal. Their websites articulate views such as “Parents who do not practise any religion, probably the majority, were now becoming increasingly alarmed at the increasingly evangelical nature of religious education in some schools. Some of it even employed brainwashing techniques – and this has been publicly defended by the highest educational authorities of the Church of England. While Religious Education remains heavily influenced by ‘faith groups’, with their vested interests, it will never be objective.” [NSS website 1.9.14]

In the face of such opposition teachers need to be very sure of their aims and objectives so as not to attract criticism. The atheist groups are very aware of the provisions of the law in both RE and CW and very willing to support parents who believe that schools are circumventing the law in any way giving advice such as “You should find out what is going on in your child’s class before exercising your legal right to withdraw him or her. . . . Sometimes just pointing out politely that the language, assumptions or tasks in RE were excluding or upsetting your child, or actively exclude families who do not share those assumptions, is enough to remind the teacher of what s/he should be doing.” {BHA website 1.9.14}

Pressure from NSS has already brought about the provision that pupils over 16 can self-withdraw and they are now actively working to have this right given to younger pupils. Groups also stipulate the difference between worship and assembly and suggest that withdrawn pupils should not be removed from assembly as they might miss important information or celebration. This is something of which the school needs to be aware and to handle sensitively.

However, BHA are active in working with SACREs to promote inclusive RE and both organisations recognise that withdrawal may not be the best solution. They remind parents that isolating a child from their class is undesirable socially, and be seen as ‘a negation of inclusiveness’. It may be helpful to visit advice on their websites before a meeting with atheist parents in order to ensure informed discussion.

c) Other requests for withdrawal

Sometimes parents respond strongly to local or national circumstances. On such occasions headteachers need to react to parents who have strongly held beliefs against certain faith groups or cultures to avoid the creation of a ‘pick and mix’ culture in RE and CW which such parents determine which faiths their children learn about and which areas they must be withdrawn from. It is also important to avoid a ‘snowball’ reaction to a specific incident. Through open and honest discussion about the aims of the curriculum, the content of the scheme of work, the learning intentions of individual class teachers and the need for an informed and educated response, it should be possible to overcome some elements of inherently negative attitudes, in particular Islamophobia. If a parent is not open to such discussion complete withdrawal of the child from such work might be the most practicable solution, but this directly opposes the desire for an inclusive and respectful cohesive community.

Managing the right to withdrawal – practical advice

The legal requirements do not always answer the practical questions of how a school manages the request for withdrawal within their own context. School may wonder what they are obliged to provide as an alternative, and how to cope with the practicalities.

The provision for regular off site teaching is, in reality, very unlikely to be invoked within most of our schools. It could, however, arise where a CE school is close to a Roman Catholic [RC] school that is over-subscribed. This is the situation for which the right to withdrawal was created, and where possible the two schools should work together to ensure that pupils can attend RE and CW in the school of their choice without any negative effects on their education. It should be noted that while it is the parents’ responsibility to supervise the children between the schools, but that the school must insure that all safeguarding measures are in place, particularly if parents are responsible for those from other families. A risk assessment which covers supervision, vehicles, DBS, route and timings need to be in place as the school may still have ultimate responsibility for their pupils.

Occasional withdrawal for RE or, more particularly, worship off site should also be explored. For example parents may wish their pupils to attend a RC Mass rather than a CE Eucharist, and where possible this should be facilitated. Equal provision should be made for those of any Christian denominations or faith groups who wish to withdraw their children in order to take part in teaching or worship off site. This may be seen as withdrawal if it fits the criteria, but government guidance states that “Schools must treat absence as authorised when it is due to religious observance. The day must be set exclusively apart for the religious body to which the parents belong.” [School attendance DFE 2013].

While parents have a right to have their children religiously educated according to their wishes during the school day and a pupil may be withdrawn from the school premises to receive RE elsewhere, our schools can be on the receiving end for pupils whose parents choose to use the right of withdrawal in order to offer Anglican RE, or most likely, worship. In reality it is most likely to be taken up for attendance at worship to celebrate festivals or to partake in the Eucharist. If parents should ask for their children to visit our schools for RE or worship the schools should do their best to meet the requirements and make any visitors welcome.

Most issues connected to withdrawal, however, relate to the school’s own pupils within the normal school day and on site. These usually revolve around three issues - where the child should be, what they should be doing and who should be supervising them.

a) Where the child should be

When a pupil is withdrawn in whole or in part from RE most schools are able to move the pupil to another venue within the school so that they can be supervised in a context where RE is not happening. Sometimes this is not possible in very small schools where there may not be anywhere else for the pupil to go. In such cases parents should be informed that the pupil will be in the classroom setting but will not be doing RE according to the school's basic curriculum, and this should not present problems.

When a pupil is removed from the classroom setting they should be in an area where a qualified member of staff can supervise them adequately. It may be in a withdrawal room, library, school office, headteacher's room or many other places around the building. All are acceptable provided that the furniture and setting enable the child to tackle their work in an appropriate way, and there is proper supervision.

More difficulty will be encountered with times of worship. When numbers of withdrawals are small all children should be supervised together by one person in one place. Some CW celebrations only involve one key stage or year group, in which case withdrawn children can be managed within other classes. However, all pupils should be included in assembly and often it can be arranged with parents that withdrawn pupils sit by the door and leave worship only during any prayers or hymns, under the supervision of a nearby teacher.

Problems may arise when the school visits the local church, particularly when this is for a Eucharist, or for distinctively Christian festivals. Each situation needs to be handled with sensitivity, and within the practical context of realistic supervision. If the worship is taking place at the beginning or end of a session the school could legally suggest that the withdrawn pupil spends time studying the family's beliefs at home.

When RE involves a visit outside school parents of withdrawn pupils should be approached, the outcomes of the visit explained and parents invited to attend with their children. When this offer is declined children should spend the day in another class with appropriate work unless the whole school are involved in which case the child may be forced to remain at home. There is certainly no requirement for a member of staff to miss the visit in order to provide supervision.

b) What pupils should be doing

What the pupils are allowed to do during the time when they are withdrawn is often one of the most difficult and controversial aspects of coping with the request. While the school is entitled to ask the parent to provide alternative RE for the child, many parents may not be prepared or able to produce work of a suitable standard. If they refuse to comply with the request they cannot question efforts by the school to produce suitable materials. The school is under no obligation to set work through a failure by a parent to provide it, but this does not remove the right to withdraw the child. Finding activities can be difficult although most faith groups are able to offer support and if the family are atheist the BHA does produce activities relating to philosophical and ethical studies which can be used. Problems are greatest when occupying young children.

Where RE teaching forms part of a cross curricular topic withdrawal can be handled by discussing the programme with the parents and agreeing to vary some of the work, allowing the withdrawn pupil to take a full and active part in the lessons but providing them with slightly modified resources and tasks.. As a result, the benefits of the integrated approach to teaching RE and the rights of the parents are both protected.

However, much RE will be taught through discrete units. Ideally wherever the child is placed they should be usefully employed in an activity which relates to their beliefs or philosophies and which has recognisable learning outcomes. However, alternative planning for one pupil should be avoided and the easiest solution may be that a child joins a parallel class who is working on a different area of the curriculum, although it is likely that the child will be involved in a National Curriculum subject, and so officially does not concur with the letter of the law. While it is better if the child is provided with RE related work, practically it may not be easy to produce such work without the teacher spending time preparing it; an unjustifiable use of their time. While one solution is to ask pupils to produce a research project on their parents' faith or worldview, but this will not keep them occupied for thirteen years of education! In practice it is perfectly acceptable for class teachers at times to draw on play areas, libraries, topic books, computers and support activities to provide

natural alternatives to the RE when this can be done without others seeing the activity as something better than the RE or CW on offer.

The problem is that schools may undermine the place of RE within their curriculum by allowing pupils to pursue other curriculum options in place of RE. If this is allowed it may also be seen as giving withdrawn children an advantage in another curriculum area. This could be interpreted by other parents as disadvantaging the pupils who are not withdrawn and so may start of a trend of withdrawal. Withdrawal should also not be seen as a chance for pupils to 'catch up' with homework. As children should not be using withdrawal time to do work relating to other curriculum areas this opposes the spirit of the law while not solving the question of what the children should be doing, especially when a young child has to cope with withdrawal from both RE and CW on the same day. In such cases it is best to apply common sense to the situation. It is extremely helpful to teachers when work or activities are set and assessed by a supportive headteacher, when this is practical.

c) Who should be supervising them

Although the parent has the right to withdraw the child, the school still has a duty of care if the child remains on the school premises. A school may suggest that the parent takes responsibility for supervising the child, though this is likely to receive little positive response, except when they are working with the school to ensure that the RE they require is delivered.

Most children who are withdrawn from RE will be able to spend the time with a teacher or TA, in their own or another classroom. Often a pupil may sit in an area away from the classroom where another adult is supervising a small group of pupils. However, less guidance has been written on managing the right to withdraw for collective worship, and yet this is the request most commonly made in our schools, and it raises particular practical issues. In a church school CW provides an opportunity for the whole school to celebrate together its distinctive Christian character. It is strongly recommended that the whole community share in this and it may therefore be seen as unreasonable to ask a staff member to miss worship to supervise a withdrawn child. However it is extremely unlikely that every adult will be involved in worship. It may be that, for example, office or library staff, are available to supervise. If this is the case it must be agreed with the parents. If, for example, pupils are sent to the library, the school needs to ensure that the librarian understands their role in supervision and that the pupil can show that they have produced work during that time. The member of staff should receive appropriate training and be adequately insured while their duty of supervision should be contained in their job description. If an incident were to occur during the time of withdrawal the headteacher is responsible for that pupil and what happens to them. Schools should remember, however, that the request for withdrawal should not incur any expense to the school!

Facts and pitfalls

Problems may arise across the curriculum which have nothing to do with the right to withdrawal from RE or CW, but from the lack of withdrawal from National Curriculum subjects. For example some groups may query the study of religious works within the music GCSE course. History may include discussion of Judaism and Islam when the Middle Eastern crisis is studied, or the foundation of the Church of England and the impact of the Reformation in Tudor times. More importantly teaching on evolution in science is non-negotiable as this is part of National Curriculum science and not RE.

One school had a large number of complaints following homework connected to magic and spell writing. Investigation showed that this was connected to work on Shakespeare. Few would query his central place in the literacy curriculum or the use of Macbeth as one of his most popular and accessible plays. However, the task of composing a spell of revolting ingredients to achieve an evil outcome, while fun, needed a very careful and sensitive approach. For all teaching across the curriculum, not just in RE, the school's values need to be embedded in the pedagogy, planning and delivery to avoid unnecessary compromise. For example, when discussing evolution, the school can remind pupils of the Christian belief in God as creator of the amazing world we live on. This approach, when combined with inclusive respect, often defuses

problems with groups who may consider withdrawal from RE and CW; or complain about the delivery of National Curriculum areas from which there is no right of withdrawal.

One difficulty that has to be faced when withdrawal is requested is explaining to the rest of the class why one pupil is being treated differently, especially when a request is made after the individual has been joining activities previously. The questions of other pupils should be answered simply and accurately although with older pupils it is best to ask the withdrawn pupil if the situation can be explained to the whole class, without causing embarrassment. It is important that teachers do monitor the feelings of pupils about their withdrawal and further discuss this with parents when they feel this is appropriate.

The right of sixth form pupils to withdraw themselves from RE and CW needs particularly careful handling in order to avoid a 'we don't have to turn up' mentality. The correct process recommended for parents should be rigorously applied. Written requests resulting in an interview with the headteacher or principal, and demands for philosophical work with specific outcomes done on site under supervision will usually deter frivolous applications!

RE cannot be option. Secondary schools have a clear responsibility to look closely at timetables and to ensure that all pupils have RE. It is not acceptable that pupils are off site (unless studying RE) when their class is timetabled RE and neither is it acceptable that the school suggests withdrawal from RE as an option for enabling a pupil to have time outside of school to pursue work related learning. Pupils with learning difficulties can be withdrawn for suitably supported RE, but cannot be denied this aspect of learning

There is no legal requirement for RE or CW within nursery classes, and so no right to withdraw. However issues may arise, especially when early years children are taught together and all join in worship. The school's withdrawal strategies are best applied early.

Withdrawal should not cost the school money and it is not acceptable for staff to be used one-to-one for withdrawal over a prolonged period. This is especially the case when withdrawals are not directly connected with RE and CW such as for Christmas lunches from which JW pupils ask to be excused. If an alternative venue has been agreed parents should arrange supervision. Such agreements are not the school's duty and fall outside the scope of the right to withdrawal. They are made because schools wish to be inclusive and supportive, and work with parents as far as is practical, but parents cannot assume that all their requirements will always be met, nor can they hold a school to ransom. The school only has to support their requests in as far as the law demands.

All teachers should be aware of the school's procedures with regard to withdrawal. The law also states that no teacher can be required to teach RE or lead collective worship if he/s does not wish to do so, although we would hope that this issue would be raised and discussed during the appointment and interview process when potential staff should be made aware of the school's Christian foundations and their implications.

Policies, prospectus and websites

The school's Church of England foundations and status should be clearly stated throughout documentation. Any prospectus or website should include reference to the school's distinctive Church of England character, how this affects its ethos, mission statement and the Christian values of the school. It should also celebrate the important place of collective worship and religious education within school life. If this is clearly stated prospective parents and staff should be fully aware of the school's status.

When a school converts to academy status the position of RE and CW should be established in their instrument of governance, and this statement should include the right to withdrawal.

However it is a legal requirement that there is a statement making parents aware of their right to withdrawal. This should form part of both the RE and CW policies and should be clear about the limited scope of withdrawal. Suggested wording is:

Atschool we wish to be an inclusive community but recognise that parents have the legal right to withdraw their children from religious education or collective worship on the grounds of conscience, without giving a reason. Parents wishing to exercise this right are asked to write to the headteacher who will then invite the parents into school to discuss their concerns, clarify the nature of the RE and worship provided by the school and set out the options open to the parents as set out in education law. However, the right of withdrawal does not extend to other areas of the curriculum when, as may happen on occasion, spontaneous questions on religious matters are raised by pupils or there are issues related to religion that arise in other subjects. Where a pupil is withdrawn from RE and do not take part in alternative religious education they will be supervised by an appropriate member of staff whilst doing work set by their parents which will seek to further their knowledge and understanding of their parents beliefs and values.

Conclusion

Our Church of England schools should strive to ensure that they are consistently excellent, distinctive and inclusive, and that the whole curriculum is underpinned by Christian values. Religious Education is an important part of the curriculum in all Church of England schools. Its nature, objectives and content should be shared and parents notified about plans for RE as part of the curriculum for the coming session for their child's class. This approach should ensure that parents recognise that RE is of educational value to all pupils, whatever their belief background. In the same way collective worship should lie at the heart of school life, proclaiming its distinctive character and faith but in a way that is relevant, inclusive and that leads each pupil a little further in their spiritual journey. In this way the likelihood of parental requests for withdrawal should be reduced. However, when they are made they must be handled according to the legal guidance, while there is scope for a little realism and adaptability in order to ensure the best for every pupil, whether withdrawn or not.