

Getting a meaningful alternative to collective worship at your child's school: steps to success



A guide by Humanists UK

A MEANINGFUL ALTERNATIVE TO WORSHIP

In November 2019, parents Lee and Lizanne Harris [mounted a successful legal challenge](#) to secure a meaningful alternative to collective worship at their children's school. What this means is that the school has to provide a second assembly for their children that is of equal educational worth and is designed to 'further the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development of pupils regardless of religion or belief'. It will be delivered by a teacher and, unlike collective worship, will 'not take any particular religion as true'.

If you would like to secure a similar meaningful alternative to collective worship at your child's school, you can start by following these simple steps. If you need further information, advice, or support at any stage of the process, please [contact us](#) and we would be more than happy to assist.

1) FIND OUT WHAT IS HAPPENING

Since the possibility of providing a meaningful alternative to collective worship is a relatively new idea, you may like to start the process by finding out what is happening at your child's school. This could be done by talking to your children and to other parents, checking the school's website, or by arranging an informal discussion of the issues with their teacher or headteacher. Remember, however, that you are under no legal obligation to disclose your personal beliefs to the school or to provide reasons for your decision to withdraw your child from collective worship or religious education.

Make sure you keep a record of your findings. Save all correspondence (letters, emails, etc) with the school, and make and keep notes of any verbal discussions you have with members of staff, including the date and time at which they happened.

In any initial discussions (which could take place in person, over the phone, or even via email), try to build up a picture of what is currently happening. You might wish to explain your objections to the practice of collective worship, why you think it threatens the freedom of religion or belief of children, young people and their families, and why you think it should ultimately be replaced by inclusive assemblies that are suitable for children from all backgrounds. You can find details of some of the [key arguments against collective worship on our website](#). There is also a link to the site [Assemblies for All](#) which provides an alternative model for the kind of assembly that might take place instead of worship.

In the early stages of the process, it might also be helpful to ascertain whether other parents of children at the school share your views on the issue. If they do, you might want to consider approaching the headteacher as a group. Although it is worth mentioning that a great many parents are unaware that collective worship is a legal requirement, so you may need to raise awareness of this fact before you ask whether any of them would be likely to support a campaign to introduce an alternative form of assembly.



2) FORMALLY REQUEST A MEANINGFUL ALTERNATIVE TO COLLECTIVE WORSHIP

Once you have approached the school informally, you will begin to get a feel for the general attitude they have to the issue of collective worship and the provision of a meaningful alternative and this should help to inform your next steps. But whatever the outcome of those initial discussions, you will need to kick off the formal process for establishing that alternative by making a written request. This may be sent via email or in hard copy. Below, we have provided a template that you can use to help you write this letter.

3) IF YOUR REQUEST IS GRANTED, CONTACT HUMANISTS UK

If the school responds positively to the request for a meaningful alternative, please [get in touch](#). This kind of success will help us to show other schools that it is possible to offer such provision and convince them to provide it to their own pupils.

4) IF YOUR REQUEST IS REFUSED, CONTACT HUMANISTS UK AND CONSIDER REGISTERING A COMPLAINT

As the outcome of the Harris case demonstrates, just because a school initially refuses a request to provide a meaningful alternative to worship, this needn't be the end of the story. Indeed, such a decision is, in our view, unlawful, and the Harris case similarly saw the school and the multi-academy trust deciding it should concede.

The Harrises asked the school to provide a meaningful alternative to collective worship that is of equal educational worth, but focused on the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development of all pupils, regardless of their religion or belief. A failure to provide this amounts to less favourable treatment on the grounds of religion or belief and a failure to ensure the education being provided is fully objective and pluralistic.

For this reason, if your child's school says that it won't provide an alternative to collective worship for withdrawn children, we would strongly urge you to get in touch with us **promptly** with a view to challenging the decision through the official complaints procedure. Circumstances will vary from school to school, so it is extremely helpful to seek advice **before** you move forward with your complaint. This will ensure that you don't inadvertently derail the process or make mistakes that will be difficult to rectify later on.

For further information contact our Education Campaigns Manager Ruth Wareham by emailing campaigns@humanism.org.uk or on 020 7324 3000.



Meaningful alternative: model letter

Dear [INSERT NAME],

RE: Provision of a meaningful alternative to collective worship at [INSERT NAME OF SCHOOL]

I am writing to request that my children are provided with a meaningful alternative to collective worship that is of equal educational worth and which, unlike worship itself, is suitable for all pupils regardless of religion or belief and does not treat any particular religious perspective as true.

As you are no doubt aware, the law requiring daily acts of collective worship that are broadly Christian in character permits parents to withdraw their children from these sessions. However, I am not aware that [INSERT NAME OF SCHOOL] provides to these pupils with an inclusive alternative that is equally designed to further their spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development. Any children withdrawn are therefore denied access to this important aspect of their education solely on the grounds of religion or belief.

This is not only patently unfair, but I also think it is out of step with the law. Following a High Court challenge, [Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust recently decided](#) it would provide withdrawn children from one of its academies with no religious character with 'age-appropriate inclusive materials/activities... normally delivered by a teacher so as to facilitate the resources being used by pupils in a meaningful way which takes the place of the collective worship they have been withdrawn from'. It was also agreed that these sessions 'will not take any particular religion as true' and should instead be 'designed to further the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development of all pupils, regardless of religion or belief'. The agreement was signed off by legal representatives at the Department for Education.

I would therefore request that you introduce a similar meaningful alternative to collective worship at [NAME OF SCHOOL].

Should you be interested, a model of what inclusive assemblies might look like can be found on the website [Assemblies for All](#). I would also be more than happy to discuss the matter with you in more detail in a meeting.

Best wishes,

[INSERT NAME]

You can find a Word version of this draft letter at [humanists.uk/cw-letter](https://www.humanists.uk/cw-letter)

