The Secretary of State for Education is currently considering a range of ways forward for collective worship in the education system. We anticipate that, despite widespread support for change, any proposal to remove the requirement for schools to provide daily acts of worship will prove controversial in some quarters. As consistent supporters of inclusive school assemblies, but not of collective worship in schools, the British Humanist Association presents the arguments for change below.

Worship
Worship, as it is normally understood, is not something that should be demanded of communities such as schools which serve those of many faiths and none. Worship excludes and alienates many pupils, and it is increasingly difficult to find teachers and heads willing to lead it. The law is widely disregarded, particularly in secondary schools, where Ofsted reports approximately 80% non-compliance. Worship unwillingly undertaken encourages hypocrisy and is often badly done, and religious people and organisations, as well as teaching unions, oppose collective worship in schools.

There will never be complete agreement on this but there is considerable demand for change and agreement about what is suitable for schools, as seen in Collective Worship Reviewed, the report of a consultation carried out by the Religious Education Council, the National Association of SACREs and the Interfaith Network in 1997.

Although parents and teachers have the right of excusal, we do not believe this is a proper or satisfactory solution: it is rarely exercised by parents who do not want their children to be singled out or to miss the valuable parts of school assemblies; and the right does not extend to young people themselves, even those over 16. The right to be excused from worship should not be used to justify an unsatisfactory status quo.

Inclusion and accommodation
One unintended result of the legal requirement that school worship should be “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character” is resentment by minority religions of this “default Christian” position. This contributes to perceptions of discrimination in education and to demands for faith-based schools for minority groups which may eventually lead to the fragmentation of the school system on ethno-religious lines. Ways can and should be found for pupils of many faiths and none to be included in school assemblies without offence, with those who want to worship being accommodated by the provision of time and space for optional worship.

A more detailed account of our policies on accommodation in schools can be found in the BHA’s 2002 policy paper A Better Way Forward.

Assemblies
The BHA supports good inclusive school assemblies of a moral and reflective nature, which can bring the school community together to celebrate shared values, news and achievements. Many schools are in fact doing this and doing it well, but they are technically breaking the law and so attract criticism from Ofsted. An Ofsted reprimand for non-compliance can often be found in the same report as praise for the school’s excellent work on the “spiritual, moral, social and cultural development” of their pupils, thus demonstrating that there is little or no connection between collective worship and “spiritual, moral, social and cultural development”. A growing number of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) and educational publishers provide sound advice on inclusive assemblies, and recent legislation in Scotland on “religious observance” in schools appears to be encouraging good inclusive practice in Scottish schools.

What should be done?
As an interim measure, improvements could be achieved by the replacement of DfES Circular 1/94 (which insists on a narrow interpretation of the legal requirement for "broadly Christian" worship) with new guidance. This could offer a redefinition of worship more suitable for schools than the current one, and could recommend inclusive assemblies, suitable for all. It could also encourage schools to opt out of the requirement for Christian worship by making the “determination” process simpler and more widely known.

However, in order to achieve a thorough and satisfactory solution, substantive legislative change is needed. New legislation could remove the requirement for schools to provide “collective worship”, ending ambiguity and the need for theological interpretations from the DfES, and giving schools the flexibility they need to conduct assemblies suitable for their pupils. Legislation should require that school assemblies are not distinctive of any particular (religious or non-religious) belief, replacing the current requirement that worship “reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief without being distinctive of any particular Christian denomination.” (School Standards and Framework Act 1998, Schedule 20)

We urge all those that would like to see schools enabled to share their values and ethos without hypocrisy to support a change in the law when it is proposed.

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