

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE IN SCHOOLS: HIGHLAND COUNCIL GUIDANCE FOR HEAD TEACHERS

INTRODUCTION

As well as being a statutory element of a school's provision, religious observance also has an important part to play in the development of the learner's four capacities, as a successful learner, confident individual, responsible citizen and effective contributor¹.

The [Scottish Government's letter of 21 February 2011](#) replaces the guidance previously contained within Circular 1/2005 *Provision of Religious Observance in Scottish Schools*: The Circular has been updated to reflect the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence and applies to all primary, secondary and special schools and informs the following guidance for Head Teachers.

The Education (Scotland) Act continues to impose a statutory duty on local authorities to provide religious observance in Scotland's schools. Scottish Government Ministers consider religious observance to be an important educational experience for children and young people at all stages of primary and secondary school. They accept the recommendations of the *Religious Observance Review Group Report* of May 2004. In so doing, Ministers believe that learning and teaching can build on Scotland's strong Christian traditions without compromising them, while also promoting the understanding of, and respect for other faiths and beliefs, and non-belief.

The arrangements for religious observance must be clearly set out in the school handbook and reference should also be made in school Equality and Diversity Policies. These must both be available to parents on the school website. A timetable of religious observance assemblies throughout the year should be made available to parents and carers to enable them to make arrangements to withdraw their child/children should they wish to do so.

The same rights and reflective practice as outlined in this Guidance applies to Religious and Moral Education provision in schools and separate Highland RME Guidance is being developed.

AIMS OF RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

The aims of religious observance are defined as:

- *Promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community;*
and
- *Express and celebrate the shared values of the school community².*

DEFINITION OF RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

The Report of the Review Group defines the term for use in schools in Scotland as:

¹[Education Scotland](#)

²Religious Observance Review Group Report: p12

'Community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community'³. This includes:

- building a sense of community;
- understanding spiritual development; and
- celebrating shared values.

In our increasingly religiously diverse society, it should be recognised that the above 'community acts' should be designed to be fully inclusive of those of other faiths and none.

The Rights of Parents and Pupils

Under the terms of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, parents have the right to withdraw their child from religious observance. The terms of the Act state that "no pupil in any such school shall be placed at any disadvantage with respect to the secular instruction given therein by reason of his being withdrawn". The school will deal with such requests with sensitivity and understanding. Head Teachers are encouraged to meet with any parent wishing to withdraw their child to ensure that they are clear about the school policy. In particular, parents should be reassured that religious observance adopts an open and respectful approach and does not seek to compromise the beliefs of any pupils or their families. Where a child is withdrawn from religious observance, schools should make suitable arrangements for the child to participate in worthwhile alternative activity. In no circumstances should a child be disadvantaged from being withdrawn from religious observance. Pupils must not be pressured into religious observance against their will and their Human Rights guarantee a child of sufficient maturity, intelligence and understanding the right to withdraw from religious observance.

In addition to Scottish legislation, Article 14 of the European Convention on the Rights of the Child, states

"Every child has the right to think and believe what they want, and also to practise their religion, as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights. Governments must respect the rights of parents to give their children guidance about this right."

It should be borne in mind that a child's freedom of belief should not be compromised through indoctrination in one preferred belief system promulgated through RO and/or RME.

Examples of suitable activities and projects which reflect moral development that could be undertaken by pupils who have opted not to attend religious observance can be found at appendix 1.

³Religious Observance Review Group Report: p12

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Central to this document is the principle of respect for others. Religious, cultural and personal characteristics permeate and enrich the life and work of our schools. This diversity of belief and tradition provides an ideal context in which pupils can learn about and so learn from what is important in the lives of others. The guidance recognises and welcomes diversity and promotes respectful understanding.

Religion and belief is one of the 'protected characteristics' of the Equality Act 2010. Religion has the meaning usually given to it but belief includes religious and philosophical beliefs including lack of belief (e.g. Atheism). Generally, a belief should affect your life choices or the way you live for it to be included in the definition.

However acts of worship or other religious observance organised by or on behalf of a school are not covered by the provisions prohibiting religion or belief discrimination, whether or not they are part of the curriculum as outlined in the Equality Act 2010 [Technical Guidance for Schools in Scotland](#) .

Any school can carry out collective worship of a broadly Christian nature (as public schools are obliged to do under section 8 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 and Scottish government policy guidance), or in line with any other religion, without this being unlawful discrimination. Schools are not required to provide opportunities for separate worship for the different religions and beliefs represented among their pupils.

Schools are not prohibited from organising or participating in acts of worship or religious observance celebrating any faith, for example:

- Diwali, in the Hindu faith;
- Hanukkah and Passover in the Jewish Faith;
- Harvest Festival and Easter celebrations in the Christian Faith; and
- Eid in the Muslim Faith.

More information can be found on the [Interfaith Scotland website](#).

Worship is "reverence and adoration for a deity". An extended definition could include admiration or devotion shown towards a person (for example Ghandi, Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King) or principle. For non-faith schools with secular or multi-faith demographics, collective worship could involve reflection of the things, or principles, that give students' lives meaning.

Schools may feel a different name for the events which meet their religious observance requirements will be more appropriate to their context and culture. This is to be encouraged but needs careful thought and if possible some external reference point. For example, in a non-denominational school, the use of the title Time for Reflection might be appropriate because it is a clear description of the activity.

This would not amount to religion or belief discrimination against pupils of other religions or of no religion.

Example: A school organises an annual nativity play for pupils and a carol concert to celebrate Christmas. It would not be discrimination if the school were to fail to hold events to celebrate Diwali for Hindu pupils.

Example: A school that is attended mainly by Christian pupils arranges special events to celebrate Diwali and Hanukkah. This would be lawful and an example of good practice. However, it is also essential for good practice that parents are informed sufficiently far in advance of such events so that they can if they wish inform the school that their child will not take part.

Schools with religious character or ethos

The Act permits schools with a religious character or ethos to conduct themselves in a way that discriminates against pupils on the grounds of religion or belief. This means that a school with a religious character does not have to make special provision for pupils of a different faith or incorporate aspects of their faith into its curriculum. However, some pupils may be attending the school because no school of their religion or belief/non-belief is accessible, or the pupil may not be of the same religion or belief/non-belief as their parents. It is therefore essential that children are not pressured into religious observance against their will. A child of sufficient maturity, intelligence and understanding must have the right to withdraw from religious observance.

Example: A Roman Catholic school that organises a visit for pupils to Lourdes is not discriminating by not arranging a trip to Mecca for two Muslim pupils who attend the school.

This exemption does not cover exclusions or subjecting a pupil to any other detriment, so a pupil cannot be punished or penalised for things that relate to his or her religion or belief.

Example: A pupil at a Catholic primary school tells his class during a religious education (RE) lesson that he has decided to become a humanist. The pupil is told to leave the class and is given a detention for being insubordinate by telling the class that he has renounced the school's faith. This is likely to be direct discrimination because of religion or belief.

If a member of school staff conveys his or her beliefs in a way that involves Haranguing, berating or demeaning a particular pupil or group of pupils, then this would be unacceptable in any circumstances and would constitute discrimination.

Diversity

Many school communities are characterised by a diversity of religious beliefs and practices reflecting a range of religious and other stances including atheism. It is important that all pupils and staff can participate with integrity in the forms of religious observance devised by their school without compromise to their personal faith stances.

- **A range of people from the school and community should be involved in the preparation, planning and presentation of the assembly, programme of assemblies or other gathering. Pupils should have a key role in this process.**

One implication of this diversity is that the forms of religious observance may differ from school to school. Schools are therefore encouraged to make decisions based on local needs and circumstances.

- **School census information on the beliefs of pupils should be analysed; and**
- **Full consultation should take place with all interested parties on how religious observance can be implemented in each school community, including on what to call the events that meet the religious observance requirements for that school community⁴, for example, some schools may choose to call it ‘time for reflection’.**

Useful information on meeting the needs of pupils with a range of faiths has been developed by the Edinburgh Interfaith Association ‘Faith and Young People: A guide for teachers and those responsible for the care and provision of young people’s needs in Primary and Secondary Schools’ This can be accessed at the Highland GLOW Equality, Diversity and Children’s Rights site (accessed via the For Highland’s Children tile).

BUILDING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Regular assemblies or other gatherings for religious observance provide opportunities for the school community to reflect on, and develop, a deeper understanding of the dignity and worth of each individual and the shared values of the school community. Good religious observance strengthens pupils’ sense of belonging to their school. It is a basic premise that the way in which religious observance in schools is implemented should always be justifiable on educational grounds.

Examples to be added as part of consultation

UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Spiritual development *‘includes being helped to recognise, reflect upon and develop a deeper understanding of the value and worth of each individual which comes from one’s dignity as a person’⁵*. The spiritual dimension comes from what makes us human and this can be seen and expressed in many ways. There are many contexts across the curriculum that encourage pupils to consider matters from a spiritual perspective.

The potential for spiritual development is open to everyone and is not confined to the development of religious beliefs. It can play an important role in the spiritual development of all members of the school community.

⁴Scottish Government letter 21 February 2011: para. 6

⁵Religious Observance Review Group Report: p12

In spite of the move away from involvement with formal religion in contemporary Scottish society, there is evidence of a growing interest in the spiritual dimension. Many people outwith formal religion would use the term spiritual to describe key aspects of their experience.

Many schools would identify and promote values such as 'honesty, liberty, justice, fairness and concern for others'⁶ as common shared values in our society. Different communities hold values that are particular to their own tradition. These values should be acknowledged, the right of people to hold them should be respected and pupils should be encouraged to reflect on these values and the lifestyles which they reflect.

Some examples:

- International Darwin Day www.darwinday.org
- Different Families, Same Love <http://www.stonewall.org.uk/get-involved/education/different-families-same-love>
- Holocaust Memorial Day <http://hmd.org.uk/>

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE AND ORGANISED WORSHIP

Religious observance is not concerned in the main with organised worship. Worship is a free response of an individual and community to what is considered worthy of worship. This response involves three elements:

- Belief;
- Desire to worship; and
- Commitment to life stances.

An organised act of worship is based on the assumption that those present share these elements.

In distinguishing between religious observance and organised acts of worship, the following statement should be considered:

'Where the school community, whether denominational or non-denominational, is continuous with a faith community, that community's faith in "the focus of worship", may be assumed and worship may be considered to be appropriate as part of the formal activity of the school. Where, as in most non-denominational schools, there is a diversity of beliefs and practices, the review group believes that the appropriate context for an organised act of worship is within the informal curriculum as part of the range of activities offered for example by religions, groups, chaplains and other religious leaders.'⁷

ASSEMBLIES AND RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

The approach to religious observance should be that outlined in the Scottish Government's letter of 21 February 2011:

⁶Religious and Moral Education 5-14 National Guidelines

⁷Religious Observance Review Group Report p16

'Scottish Government Ministers welcome the tradition that, in Roman Catholic denominational schools, Catholic Liturgy will largely shape the nature and frequency of religious observance activities in the classroom and in the wider school community.

'In recognition of Scotland's Christian heritage, non-denominational schools are also encouraged to draw upon the rich resources of this tradition when planning religious observance. However, many school communities contain pupils and staff from faiths other than Christianity or with no faith commitment, and this must be taken fully into account in supporting spiritual development. It is of central importance that all pupils and staff can participate with integrity in forms of religious observance without compromise to their personal faith.'⁸

At present school assemblies are the most common vehicle for delivering religious observance.

A clear distinction has to be drawn between assemblies devised for the delivery of religious observance and assemblies which support other purposes.

Communicating day-to-day administrative arrangements and information about extracurricular activities at an assembly is important for the life and work of the school, as is the use of assemblies for team building and moral education. However, this should be kept separate from occasions that are specifically set aside for religious observance.

It is important for those organising and leading religious observance that the overall integrity and purpose of the event are kept distinctive and are not compromised.

FREQUENCY OF RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

The frequency of religious observance needs to balance the impact on the spiritual development of the school community with providing a valuable and inclusive experience.

Every school should provide opportunities for religious observance at least six times in a school year in addition to traditional celebrations central to the life of the school community. This is a minimum requirement and schools can provide opportunities for religious observance more frequently.

While ensuring that religious observance is sufficiently frequent, the emphasis should be on quality of the experience for pupils rather than quantity.

⁸Scottish Government letter 21 February 2011

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

In order to ensure that the experience of religious observance is of a high quality those planning and leading it should look to ensure that the following characteristics are evident:

- **Location:** All schools have areas such as assembly halls or gymnasias which have the potential for being appropriate locations for religious observance. It is important that every attempt is made to ensure that pupils can participate comfortably. In addition, to take account of the fact that religious observance may at times be organised on a group basis, schools should also look to have a smaller area available if required.
- **Leadership:** The head Teacher, staff, chaplains, pupils and visitors from the community or organisations can all make effective contributions to religious observance. Sharing the leadership brings many benefits such as offering a range of perspectives on a variety of issues for pupils to consider. Good planning and clear expectations are important to ensure that the experience appeals to pupils and engages their interest.
- **Sensitivity:** Religious observance should invite pupils through an interesting and appealing stimulus to consider and reflect on a range of issues that relate to their experience. As in good teaching the stimulus for reflection should look to draw on
 - incidents which occur in the life of the school or in the local, national or international communities; and
 - a programme of values which the school wishes its pupils and staff to reflect upon as part of the annual cycle of religious festivals.
- **Atmosphere:** Good religious observance happens in atmosphere where pupils feel relaxed and open to learn from what is being said and done.

CHAPLAINS

Chaplains play an important role in the life and work of the school as a resource person and as someone who can offer pastoral and spiritual support. A full discussion should take place between Senior Management and the Chaplain on how religious observance should be planned and implemented in order to address the needs of the school community. The discussion should be based on the premise that the way in which religious observance in schools is implemented should be justifiable on educational grounds of that school, based on analysis of the school population. The role of the chaplain or chaplaincy team includes:

- being a member of the Religious Observance Team;
- being a resource for the RE curriculum;
- providing pastoral care for staff and pupils (and if appropriate, their families);
- the option of pastoral care in a secular context should always be an option for pupils
- being available at community events in the life of the school;
- having a key role at times of extreme difficulty; and
- providing a bridge and common resource across the cluster.

APPROVAL OF OTHER GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS DELIVERING INPUT TO RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

All organisations or individuals other than school Chaplains must complete the Approval and Guidance on School Liaison with Agencies form before delivering in any Highland Schools ([Insert link](#)). This will ensure that all staff are appropriately vetted and that the content of their programmes can be checked to ensure that it is in line with Curriculum for Excellence and Highland Council Education Policies.

Input from some organisations such as Prayer Space, Bible Alive and Scripture Union should be arranged to take place after school or at lunchtimes and attendance should be voluntary.

Parents must be notified if a religious organisation is visiting the school and there should be clarity about whether an organisation is contributing to religious observance or religious education, not least so that parents can if they wish withdraw their children as appropriate.

DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOLS

It is recognized that in denominational schools, there is a distinctive emphasis on nurturing the faith of pupils in line with gospel values. This is achieved through the school ethos, the religious education curriculum and in particular religious observance. In denominational schools organised acts of worship are considered appropriate as part of the formal activity of the school and will continue to feature in religious observance.

Specific support and guidance for developing religious observance in denominational schools is available to schools through the Scottish Catholic Education Service.

NURSERY SCHOOLS

There is no formal requirement for religious observance in nursery schools and classes. However, there are many opportunities to help children develop an early awareness of different religious and cultural groups and their traditions. By marking significant religious celebrations and exploring shared values as well as matters of common concern, children can build up a sense of their own uniqueness. In this way their journey of spiritual development begins. Such activities provide important foundational experiences for young children on which primary and secondary school can build, but they must follow the guidance contained in this document.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Schools will provide religious observance events of high quality. Each school will appoint a Religious Observance Team under the direction of the head Teacher or nominated deputy head Teacher to supervise the religious observance programme and events.

Regular evaluation of the programme and the events will be the responsibility of the Head Teacher or nominated depute Head Teacher, who will ensure that appropriate consultation and involvement has taken place and that where practicable shared leadership of religious events has taken place.

The quality of religious observance may also be subject to external evaluation by officers of the authority or HMI Inspectors.

SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS

Helpful support materials and website links are contained in the Highland GLOW [Equality, Diversity and Children's Rights](#) site, accessed via the For Highland's Children tile.

The Care and Learning Equalities Working Group, Bernadette Cairns, Chair
Bernadette.cairns@highland.gcsx.gov.uk

Pedagogical lead for Religious Education and Observance

Appendix 1 Religious Observance – Examples of alternative activities or projects

Learning about morality:

- being able to describe and explain features of moral issues and moral decision making

Learning from religion, beliefs and morality:

- experiencing a sense of awe and wonder about what it means to be human, the nature of the world we live in, the interconnectedness of it all and developing a deepening sense of spiritual awareness
- appreciating the importance of respect for the beliefs, values and traditions of others and being able to demonstrate this
- developing the skills and attributes to make well-judged moral and ethical decisions and to justify personal beliefs and values
- engaging in a process of personal reflection leading to a deeper understanding of personal beliefs and ideas about meaning, value and purpose in life

Early Level Experiences	First Level Experiences	Second and Third/Fourth Level Experiences
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create a visual of – ‘Me and My friends playing together’ 2. Write a recipe for a good friend 3. Create a visual to show what I like to do with my friends 4. Create a Super Hero for our planet 5. Create a visual that shows how I help others 6. Create a visual that shows the special people in my life and share what makes them special 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write a recipe for a perfect friendship 2. Create a menu for a special day 3. Design a visual to encourage others to make the right choices 4. Create a visual which represents our Universe and my place in it 5. Create a list of rules for our Universe 6. Find out about local charities in my area, what they do to help and what I can do to help – present this in a medium of your choice 7. Make a game that shows fair and unfair actions 8. Choose two characters from a film or a book and compare their actions 9. Create a visual timeline of important days in my year 10. Create a job description for the “Caretaker of the Planet” 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Represent the following quote through a medium of your choice: <i>“Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself”</i>. Chief Seattle 2. Create a visual to represent : honesty, respect and compassion 3. Make a model of the solar system and explain my place in the universe 4. Make a list of our roles on the planet and create a value line showing the roles from most to least important 5. Write a persuasive speech showing the need to be respectful to the needs of others: e.g. looking after people’s property, or caring for the elderly in the community 6. Research different brands and products and share which ones I think are the most ethical, justifying my choices 7. Create a visual to show the impact of a charity on the local community 8. Research ‘heroic’ people and create a fact file for a heroic person 9. Research ‘heroic’ people and create a visual to show what makes a ‘hero’ 10. Create a list of qualities that a ‘responsible adult’ has – put these in a value line from most important to least important quality 11. Create a board game with a variety of challenging dilemmas 12. Create a story which shows characters making the right or wrong moral choices