

## PE1487/F

Dumfries and Galloway Council Letter of 9 October 2013

Response to the Public Petition PE1487

The Education Committee of Dumfries and Galloway Council agreed the Religious Observance policy for schools in 2013. This policy sets out the aims of and key issues related to religious observance taking account of the key recommendations of the 2004 Report of the National Religious Observance Review Group and the February 2011 Guidance on Religious Observance from the Scottish Government.

Central to our policy is the principle of respect for others. Many school communities encompass a diversity of beliefs and practices reflecting the wide range of religious and other stances for living. A diversity of belief and tradition provides an ideal context in which pupils can learn what is important in their lives and the lives of others. The approach to religious observance in our policy recognises and welcomes diversity and promotes respectful understanding.

It is important that the school community can participate in religious observance without compromise to their personal faith stances. This necessitates involving a range of people from the school and community in the preparation, planning and the presentation of religious observance. Pupils should be actively involved in this process. In Dumfries and Galloway, religious observance therefore may differ from school to school as schools make decisions based on local needs and circumstances. Full consultation should take place with all interested parties on how religious observance can be implemented.

Promoting a shared set of values is an important part of school life. The definition of religious observance that is used in Dumfries and Galloway schools is:

*'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. Participation in the process is an essential element in terms of ownership of the agreed values.*

The term 'Religious Observance' is used in our policy as it adheres to Education Scotland guidelines however many school interpret this as a 'time for reflection'. This thinking space, or 'thought for the day' has a role in promoting the ethos of a school by bringing pupils together and creating a sense of community. We understand Religious Observance to be events which are inclusive, innovative and inspirational and help pupils and celebrate shared values. With this understanding, this time for reflection is completely integrated to the life of the school – interwoven to its purpose and a means by which the ethos is celebrated. We do, however, consider the term 'Religious Observance' to be unhelpful and we consider it a misnomer for the holistic practice in schools and that, perhaps, the current concerns are a reaction to the title not to the content and practice in our schools. We do recognise that it is a term included in the Act and hence used by Education Scotland in their guidance to schools and authorities but the working definition we prefer is backed up by the 2011

Guidance where the stated aim is a deeper understanding of the dignity and worth of each individual, contribution to the school and wider community.

For the reasons outlined above, our Council does not support the explicit opting-in for religious observance. We propose, however, that the title 'Religious Observance' within the guidance be re-considered. Curriculum for Excellence aims to support the health and wellbeing of children and young people, with citizenship, contribution, and confidence as core. Opportunities for spiritual development, support for mental as well as physical wellbeing and time for reflection form part of the life and work of the school towards these aims.

Our Council does not hold data on the extent of parental opting out of religious observance; we have no evidence of this causing difficulty or concern for parents or schools. Chaplains and other faith group leaders can only work in school by invitation and it is important that expectations are clear and explicit. The Religious Observance policy is a public document and makes the roles and responsibilities clear. The right to withdraw children from religious observance should always be made known to parents and their wishes respected. Parents should be provided with sufficient information on which to base a decision. It is the role of the headteacher to ensure quality educational provision across the Curriculum for Excellence entitlements for all pupils; where a child is withdrawn from religious observance, schools should make suitable arrangements for the child to participate in a worthwhile alternative activity. Any concerns parents (or indeed Education Scotland) had over management practice in schools would be investigated and any required improvement actions would be taken.

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9<sup>th</sup> October 2013