

## SCOTTISH CATHOLIC EDUCATION SERVICE

PE1487/I

by email to:  
[petitions@scottish.parliament.uk](mailto:petitions@scottish.parliament.uk)

Clerk to the Public Petitions Committee  
Scottish Parliament



9 October 2013

Dear Clerk,

### **Consideration of Public Petition PE01487**

#### Background

As Director of the Scottish Catholic Education Service, I write on behalf of the Catholic Education Commission which is the principal advisory body to the Catholic Bishops of Scotland on all matters related to education.

We have come to be aware of this petition which was given initial consideration by the Public Petitions Committee who then agreed to seek the views of certain organisations. We are surprised that we were not contacted to seek our views on this particular issue as we are the body which provides guidance to Scotland's Catholic schools on all faith aspects of the curriculum. However, we are happy now to present our considered view on this petition.

#### Support of Religious Observance

We agree with our colleagues from the Church of Scotland's Church and Society Council that Religious Observance in all schools should provide an important set of experiences for all young people. It offers the opportunity for young people to celebrate the values, beliefs, traditions and achievements of the school community. Further, it is designed uniquely to address the need for students to develop their spiritual capacities, providing time and space to reflect deeply on events, experiences, aspirations. Such reflection is supported by the wisdom from the treasury of our country's culture and our religious traditions. But it can also be enriched by the varied experience of other cultures, faiths and traditions. This important experience is not provided for by any other area of the curriculum.

#### Opt in or opt out?

We do not agree with the petitioner that pupils should be required to 'opt in' to Religious Observance, no more that they have the right to 'opt in' to other areas of the curriculum which are regarded by the school as significant in the formation of young people. A parent's right to withdraw a child from R.O. on conscientious grounds is already provided for in current

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arrangements. This should be clearly stated in School Handbooks and – to the best of our knowledge – usually is.

The issue of Religious Observance has been given considerable attention by the Education community in recent years, with a report being published in 2005 after a significant amount of discussion by various stakeholders. Learning and Teaching Scotland invested a considerable amount of time and money in gathering resources and evidence of good practice in schools. Guidance on Religious Observance within Curriculum for Excellence was published by the Scottish Government in 2011. This helpfully summarised the purpose of Religious Observance within a school's provision.

### Religious Observance in Catholic schools

The nature of Religious Observance in Catholic schools is, not surprisingly distinct from that provided in non-denominational schools. Catholic schools, following guidance provided by ourselves, duly reflect the Catholic Christian traditions in regard to the liturgical calendar, prayer and worship, the significance of certain feast days etc. This provides a rich and meaningful set of experiences, often shaped by the input of young people themselves, with the support of teachers and chaplains.

These experiences are not always 'discrete', standing alone as assemblies or services; they can emerge from classroom activity, sometimes in response to particular events or planned to connect to other experiences. This is why the guidance provided by the Scottish Government states:

*“Where a parent chooses a denominational school for their child's education, they choose to opt in to the school's ethos and practice which is imbued with religious faith and religious observance. In denominational schools, it is therefore more difficult to extricate a pupil for all experiences which are influenced by the school's faith character.”*

On the first presentation of this petition, it appeared that it may have been aimed at the practice of non-denominational schools only. Since then, however, representatives of various Secularist groups have asserted that they also wish to change the practice in denominational schools. We are confident that the Scottish Parliament will wish to uphold the Education (Scotland) Act which highlights the rights of “the denominational body” to determine the provision of religious observance and religious education in the denominational school.

Yours sincerely,

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Director

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