

The case for non-religious, fully inclusive assemblies in UK schools

The [School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#) requires that *each pupil in attendance at a community, foundation or voluntary school shall on each school day take part in an act of collective worship ... wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.*

However, [it also states that](#) *the circumstances relating to the family backgrounds of the pupils ... are relevant for determining the character of the collective worship.*

All community schools and most other schools¹ will be attended by pupils from non-religious families. Also, many pupils in all schools will identify as non-religious and/or non-Christian. They are required to attend assemblies, where most collective worship takes place. In order to accommodate these children and their parents, assemblies should not include religious worship.

To comply with the law as far as is reasonable, schools should arrange collective worship for those pupils and teachers who wish to opt in, e.g. during break time, extra-curricular visits to places of worship, prayer rooms, before or after school hours. In some schools, there might be no demand for collective worship.

Assemblies are valued by teachers, parents and pupils. They should be non-religious and inclusive (for example see the website [Assemblies for All](#)). These assemblies would incorporate values shared by religious and non-religious people alike.

Non-religious, inclusive assemblies would free teachers of any obligation to conduct religious worship or force² pupils to participate.

Non-religious parents would also welcome them.³

Inclusive assemblies should be adopted because compelling children to take part in a daily act of collective worship is immoral, in the universal sense that morality is concerned with the promotion of wellbeing. It also contravenes the European

¹ Up to 11% of parents are forced to send their children to faith schools against their wishes.

<https://i.news.co.uk/news/education/faith-schools-families-choice-religious-school-1160733?fbclid=IwAR35Raq3uguY-BOmwc8meMglYKvAY6wo6aIrLSUblh-nzrN-qmv9W9IV4Eo>

² The Framework Act 1988: *each pupil ... shall on each school day take part in an act of collective worship ...* The legal term “shall”, used in the 3rd person, means “must”.

³ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/collective-worship/>

Although parents have the right to withdraw their children from collective worship, this is rarely done; this could be due to fear of ostracization and/or the perceived value of assemblies (see, for example, <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2014/11/parents-perspective-the-collective-worship-dilemma>). Also, school assemblies are valued for other reasons. Children under 16 have no right to withdraw themselves.

Convention on Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Declaration of Human Rights⁴.

The current WSCC guidelines⁵ promote collective worship and are incompatible with the content of our agreed syllabus, e.g. mutual respect, diversity, equality, social cohesion, morality, justice, as well as our intended Worldviews approach. Instead, they should promote inclusive assemblies but also include advice on collective worship in schools where there is a demand.

LEAs are bound by the [Education Act 1996](#) and the [School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#) (see [Appendix 1](#)); however, legal penalties for promoting inclusive assemblies are so unlikely as to be ignored. It should be noted that WSCC has already broken the same law by appointing a Humanist as a full member of SACRE; there have been no penalties. The law is currently being broken by a large proportion of schools and is unenforceable.⁶ Indeed, parents recently won a legal challenge in the High Court against Burford Primary School for forcing their children to attend acts of worship.⁷ Also, SACREs cannot even advise their LEAs regarding the frequency of collective worship.⁸ LEAs' impotence to enforce the law is visible to all schools.

With the decline of Christianity and religion generally⁹, the law concerning collective worship has no legitimacy. For many people, reverence for God(s), upon which religious worship is founded, has been replaced by a reverence for human rights, civic institutions, family life, the natural world, etc.

Non-religious inclusive assemblies are supported by numerous organisations: religious (Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu), teachers (NAT, ATL, CULRE, NUT, NASUWT), head teachers (NAHT), local government (LGA), WASACRE, RE inspectors (AREIAC), parents (NCPTA) and others (e.g. SEO, VEC).¹⁰

The role of SACRE regarding collective worship is briefly mentioned in the DfE Circular 1/94¹¹. It refers to SACRE's role of advising the LEA on making provision for collective worship, i.e. making sure it takes place, nothing more. This is a hopeless task that has produced fudged guidance on how schools can essentially avoid

⁴ "Children should have freedom of thought, conscience and belief", as guaranteed under Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights and Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Human rights are both moral and legal rights.

⁵ Here is a link to the [current WSCC guidelines](#), including my comments.

⁶ Schools breaking the law regarding Collective Worship. [Humanists UK report](#).

⁷ Parents Lee and Lizanne Harris [successfully challenge compulsory collective worship](#) in school assembly on human rights grounds.

⁸ OFSTED reports have not referenced collective worship since 2004.

⁹ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/religion-and-belief-some-surveys-and-statistics/> The 2021 census shows that around 38% of residents are non-religious

¹⁰ Labour Party Policy Review, The School Curriculum, [Response from the British Humanist Association](#), p4

¹¹ DfE Circular 1/94 [Religious Education and Collective Worship](#)

religious worship, when read between the lines. Even so, the majority of schools have chosen to ignore it and break the law on a daily basis.

The role of SACRE is to give advice, which the LEA may or may not choose to follow. Furthermore, SACRE can advise the LEA on other matters, e.g. inclusive assemblies.

WSCC can continue to provide outdated immoral guidance to schools, or it can proactively encourage fully inclusive assemblies, ahead of the inevitable changes to the law.¹² There are only positive consequences for the residents of West Sussex, SACREs, and other LEAs that follow our lead.

The proposed alternative guidelines (see [Appendix 2](#)) are based on the following ideas:

- School assemblies, mealtimes, lessons, and visits from religious leaders should not include religious worship, e.g. praying, singing hymns, religious readings.
- Assembly themes should be inclusive, interesting, and concern moral, personal, social and environmental issues (see assembliesforall.org.uk).
- Alternative arrangements should be made for pupils and staff who wish to participate in religious worship, e.g. allocated rooms for collective or individual worship, reflection¹³, meditation; extracurricular activities, etc.

The moral authority and credibility of SACRE is at stake.

There is nothing to lose but much to gain.

¹² <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2878> In the meantime, justice delayed is justice denied.

¹³ Replacing collective worship with collective reflection is of no educational value, is unnatural for most teachers and children, and will also be ignored by many schools.

Appendix 1: School Standards and Framework Act 1998

Section 70: Requirements relating to collective worship.

- (1) Subject to section 71, each pupil in attendance at a community, foundation or voluntary school shall on each school day take part in an act of collective worship.
- (2) Subject to section 71, in relation to any community, foundation or voluntary school—
 - (a) the [local authority] and the governing body shall exercise their functions with a view to securing, and
 - (b) the head teacher shall secure, that subsection (1) is complied with.
- (2) Subject to paragraph 4, the required collective worship shall be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.
- (3) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (2), collective worship is of a broadly Christian character if it reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief without being distinctive of any particular Christian denomination.
- (4) Not every act of collective worship in the school required by section 70 need comply with sub-paragraph (2) provided that, taking any school term as a whole, most such acts which take place in the school do comply with that sub-paragraph.
- (5) Subject to sub-paragraphs (2) and (4)—
 - (a) the extent to which (if at all) any acts of collective worship required by section 70 which do not comply with sub-paragraph (2) take place in the school,
 - (b) the extent to which any act of collective worship in the school which complies with sub-paragraph (2) reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief, and
 - (c) the ways in which those traditions are reflected in any such act of collective worship, shall be such as may be appropriate having regard to any relevant considerations relating to the pupils concerned which fall to be taken into account in accordance with sub-paragraph (6).
- (6) Those considerations are—
 - (a) any circumstances relating to the family backgrounds of the pupils which are relevant for determining the character of the collective worship which is appropriate in their case
 - (b) their ages and aptitudes.
- (7) In this paragraph references to acts of collective worship in the school include such acts which by virtue of paragraph 2(6) take place otherwise than on the school premises.

**Appendix 2: Proposed guidelines on inclusive assemblies and collective worship
(Note: West Sussex County Council have prohibited SACRE from discussing or approving these guidelines, which were written by the Humanist member Andrew Edmondson)**

INCLUSIVE ASSEMBLIES & COLLECTIVE WORSHIP in SCHOOLS

Proposed Guidance for
West Sussex
Community Schools

Introduction

Well-planned inclusive assemblies, where the school community or a part of it meet together, perform a variety of functions that are of benefit to pupils and staff.

Most assemblies are attended by pupils and teachers with varying worldviews: Christian, non-Christian, and non-religious. For assemblies to be inclusive, there should be no collective worship.

The law does not require the inclusion of collective worship in assemblies. However, it does state that the circumstances relating to the family backgrounds of the pupils must be taken into account.

To comply with the law, as far as is reasonable, schools should arrange collective worship for those pupils and teachers who wish to opt in.

Aims of inclusive assemblies

- Create, nurture and sustain a sense of community, camaraderie and belonging.
- Develop a positive school ethos that affirms the school's priorities, aspirations and values.
- Contribute to personal, social and moral development.
- Develop core values: lessons in diversity, accountability, leadership, anti-bullying.
- Provide a structured environment where pupils learn social discipline, respect for others, listening skills, and appropriate audience participation.
- Deliver key messages, celebrate achievement, and correct antisocial behaviour.
- Provide information about the school, including extracurricular activities.
- Build confidence through pupil involvement, e.g. sharing ideas, experiences, stories.
- Set the tone, so pupils are focused, positive, calm, and ready to start the day.
- Foster cooperation between schools and the local community.
- Experience a short period of silence on special occasions, e.g. Remembrance Day, bereavement of a pupil or member of staff.
- Mark important national and international commemorative days and celebrations.
- Make senior staff visible.

"When I deliver an assembly, I strive to invite the students to consider their inner capabilities, their positive worth, their place in the community and their purpose for the week, and I do it from the touchstone of positive values. I then give them time to share what is important to them, to help them see that they are valued by the whole school community." Melisha Trotman, Principal, Primary School

PLANNING INCLUSIVE ASSEMBLIES

The leadership team should work out the vision and values to communicate during assemblies. Ideally, the assembly curriculum should be planned seven to eight weeks ahead and run from topic to topic in a carefully sequenced way.

Monday morning assembly is particularly important, as it should bring the whole school back together again after the weekend break and focus upon the week's objectives. Other assemblies during the week build on these objectives. Schools should develop their own pattern of assemblies that will include whole school, key stage, year group and class assemblies. Also, the time of assembly will vary with purpose.

Planning a school assembly is essential for success. Here are some tips on how to make school assembly exciting and fun for all concerned.

- **Establish a Theme**

A theme will bring the whole assembly together into a cohesive whole that the audience can get behind. Is it an anti-bullying rally, or is the assembly associated with a recognized event or a day of significance?

- **Introduce Interactive Elements**

The best school assemblies have interactive elements which involve pupils, even if in a small way. Asking questions and the use of music or multimedia can help draw pupils into the spirit of the event.

- **Make it Engaging**

Assemblies should convey a message and teach pupils core values about life. To do that effectively requires the assembly to be engaging enough to keep their attention. When children become inattentive, it's tough to make a connection and forge a lasting impression.

- **Preparation is Key**

Before starting the assembly, any equipment used should be checked. Faulty microphones or visual equipment can dampen the enthusiasm of the room.

- **Have clear expectations for behaviour during assemblies.**

For example, students lined up before they enter the assembly room in quiet manner. Phones should be banned and there should be an expectation that students are fully engaged throughout. All staff in the assembly should work to support this.

- **Set the appropriate atmosphere and tone:**

- A central focus, such as a display, that can help pupils think about the theme of the assembly
- Music can help create a calm and reflective mood.
- Black-out or spot lighting help to make assembly time special.
- The leader seated appropriately as the pupils arrive for assembly.
- Adults modelling the behaviour that is expected of the pupils.
- Pupils being actively included in all aspects of the assembly.

Resources

The website assembliesforall.org.uk describes hundreds of inclusive assemblies organised by calendar date, theme or organisation. Many have free materials.

COLLECTIVE WORSHIP

Many teachers, parents and pupils do not want to participate in collective worship. Consequently, some schools do not comply with the statutory requirements outlined below. Fortunately, these requirements are subject to the circumstances of pupils' family backgrounds, which gives schools sufficient leeway to remove collective worship from assemblies, lessons, mealtimes, visits to places of worship, visits from religious leaders, and other curricular activities.

Nevertheless, schools should make arrangements for those teachers and pupils who wish to take part in collective worship. These can include:

- Prayer rooms/spaces for individual or collective worship/meditation during break times, before or after school hours.
- Extra-curricular visits to places of worship.

If there is a demand for collective worship, it should be planned carefully, with sensitivity to the beliefs of all concerned. Separate groups may be necessary.

Collective worship should be offered on a strictly opt-in basis. There should be no pressure for pupils or staff to participate.

Schools following these guidelines will not need to apply for a [determination](#).¹⁴ Also, parents will not need to [withdraw](#) their children from collective worship.¹⁵

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS¹⁶

All Schools

- All pupils in attendance at a maintained school shall, on each school day, take part in an act of collective worship.
- This may be a single act of worship or separate acts for pupils in different age groups or in different school groups.
- It may take place at any time of the school day.
- Parents have the right to withdraw their children from worship
- Teachers have the right to withdraw from collective worship.

For Community schools

- For community schools (not voluntary schools) the act of worship shall be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character".
- Community schools may apply to the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) for a determination that worship in their school could be other than wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.
- Worship should take place on the school premises.

¹⁴ The law provides a mechanism, called a "determination", [detailed below](#), for schools to opt out of collective worship of a broadly Christian nature.

¹⁵ The law provides a mechanism, [detailed below](#), for parents to withdraw their children from collective worship.

¹⁶ [Education Act 1996](#) and [School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#)

For Voluntary Schools

- The type of worship to be provided in voluntary schools is the responsibility of the Governors in line with Trust Deeds.

DETERMINATIONS

A determination is a process whereby schools can apply to SACRE that their worship could be other than "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character".

Which schools can apply to SACRE and for what?

- Applications for a determination can be made only by community schools.
- Community schools may apply to SACRE for worship in the school to be other than "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character".
- They may apply on behalf of the whole school or groups of pupils in the school.
- The considerations that may apply are:
"any circumstances relating to the family background of the pupils concerned which are relevant for determining the character of the collective worship which is appropriate in their case e.g. the faith of the family."

How can a school apply to SACRE?

- If any school in West Sussex is considering an application to SACRE, the Headteacher should first contact the General Adviser (R.E.) who will be able to explain the procedures.
- Before an application the Headteacher must consult the school's governing body.
- The governors may wish, in turn, to seek the views of parents.

What form will worship take following a determination?

- SACRE will give their determination in writing to the Headteacher and the worship will have to be carried out in accordance with those instructions.

WITHDRAWAL

The provision for parents to withdraw their children from collective worship was first put in place in the 1944 Education Act and has been re-enacted in subsequent acts of parliament since with little change. The original purpose was to allow parents who, for reasons of conscience, did not want their children to attend collective worship to withdraw them from attending.

The Statutory Requirements

Subsequent acts of parliament were brought together in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. The provision for withdrawal is set out in section 71 and subsequently amended by the 2006 Education and Inspections Act to include a clause about sixth form students.

The main requirement is set out in subsection (1)

(1A) If the parent of any pupil at a community, foundation or voluntary school other than a sixth-form pupil requests that they may be wholly or partly excused from attendance at religious worship at the school, the pupil shall be so excused until the request is withdrawn.

(1B) If a sixth-form pupil requests that they may be wholly or partly excused from attendance at religious worship at a community, foundation or voluntary school, the pupil shall be so excused."

Summary of requirements

- If a parent asks that a pupil should be wholly or partly excused from attending collective worship, then the school must comply.
- Parents are not obliged to state their reasons for seeking withdrawal.
- Schools should not divulge information about withdrawal to other schools without the agreement of the parents.
- This applies to all LA maintained schools – community and voluntary.

If the request is to be partly excused, the school must make all reasonable attempts to comply but have the flexibility to deny the request if the logistics of agreeing makes it too difficult.

A parent may request that a pupil be withdrawn from school premises to receive worship of a denominational nature. A school may comply so long as the LA is satisfied that this will not interfere with the child's attendance at school other than at the beginning or end of the school day.

A parent may request that, once the child has been legally withdrawn, a child receive collective worship of a denominational nature on school premises. The school is required to allow this request if:

- the provision cannot be conveniently provided elsewhere;
- the school does not meet the costs;
- the school does not consider that because of the special circumstances it would be unreasonable to do so.

There are some special conditions relating to boarders allowing them to attend a place of worship on Sundays or other days exclusively set apart for religious observance.

A school continues to be responsible for any child withdrawn by its parents from collective worship unless the child is lawfully receiving collective worship elsewhere.

Schools are required to set out the right of withdrawal in their prospectus.

Advice for Schools

What should a school do if a request is made?

1. As this is a legal provision, the school should ask for any request for withdrawal to be made in writing.
2. To avoid any misunderstanding a head teacher will find it helpful to establish with a parent wanting to exercise the right of withdrawal:
 - the religious issues about which the parent would object to their child being taught and the elements of worship they would object to the child taking part;
 - the practical implications of withdrawal;
 - the circumstances in which the school can reasonably be expected to accommodate parental wishes; and
 - if the withdrawal is partial, whether the parent will require any advance notice of such collective worship.
3. This should not affect the fact that parents do not have to state their reasons for seeking withdrawal.
4. The school must then make arrangements to enable the withdrawal to take place and ensure the health and safety of the pupil.

How to organise withdrawal?

- The pupil's health and safety are the most important responsibility of the school.
- It would be normal for withdrawal to be exercised through the physical withdrawal of the pupil from the place where the collective worship is taking place.
- However, if both the parent and the school agree that the pupil could remain physically present, there is nothing in the law to prevent this.
- It is good practice to ensure that the pupil is gainfully employed when withdrawn; so, if they do not bring work from home, a check should be made to ensure they have something to do.

If the pupil is withdrawn from worship, a number of organisational options are used by schools, such as:

- the pupil works in the back of class and is supervised by that class teacher;
- the pupil works in another classroom;
- the pupil works in a library and is supervised by the librarian or other adult;

- in smaller schools the pupil may sit outside the office and be supervised by the office staff.