

## ***Withdrawal from RE and Collective Worship in one English LA***

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*This short article summarises the background to and concerns about the right of parents to withdraw their children from Religious Education (RE) and collective worship in English Schools. It reports on the scale of the issue in one English Local Authority (LA) and suggests that it is not a widespread issue in the area of the survey. It recommends that the survey is replicated in other areas so that a national picture can begin to be built up.*

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### ***Background***

Religion has always been a feature of schooling in England (Louden, 2010) A voluntary ‘conscience clause’ has existed in some schools since the 1820s, and in the 1870 Elementary Education Act this right was formalised by mandating that religious observance or instruction must take place at the start or end of the school day to facilitate parents withdrawing their children from such teaching which may have been from a denominational viewpoint which they did not share. (Louden, 2010). When worship and religious instruction was made compulsory in the 1944 Education Act, the parents’ right to excuse their child from it was clarified (HMSO, 1944: 25), and they were able to provide their own denominationally suitable religious instruction either at the school or elsewhere. This statutory duty on all maintained schools to provide Religious Education (RE) and ‘a daily act of Collective Worship’ together with a parental right of withdrawal from the RE provided by the school has been reaffirmed in later Educational Legislation (HMSO, 1988; 1996) and guidance (Dfe1994; DCFS 2010). This right of withdrawal has been a feature of debates outside of England and Nixon (2018) has summarised the wider Scottish and European educational situation.

## *Concerns*

Over recent years there have arisen some tensions in the operation of the withdrawal clause. Some of these concerns are in the realm of Human Rights legislation, starting from competing claims of the rights of the child and the parent, and the right to freedom of religious expression (Jensen 2005; Cumper & Mawhinney 2015; Clarke & Woodhead, 2015). There are also some concerns relating to certain aspects of the Equality Act 2010 not to discriminate because of race, religion or belief and there have been suggestions that there may be a tension between the right to allow parents to withdraw children without reason and a school's duty of care under the Prevent Agenda. The Commission on RE's Interim Report raised the question of whether the legislation was 'fit for purpose' and suggested that there were strong calls for the right to be abolished (CoRE, 2017). The report called for more evidence of the scale of withdrawal, as since a school has no duty to report withdrawal there is no national (or even local) data available. Recent research by Lundie (2018) has suggested that 71% of schools (in a national survey where 312 schools responded) had experienced a parent ask to withdraw their child from RE and/or Collective Worship. 38% had experienced a parent ask to withdraw from only a part of RE, e.g. just the teaching of Islam and in 22% of schools a parent has asked to withdraw their child from another curriculum subject for religious reasons, which is not part of the withdrawal legislation.

## *Survey*

One Standing Advisory Council on RE (SACRE) carried out a survey of schools within their area. The area is a mainly working class area with little ethnic or religious diversity, the 2011 Census showing that 98% of the population are white, 75% 'Christian' and no more than 0.2% belonging to any other religion. There is much deprivation in the area with 1 in 5 working age people are claiming an out of work benefit and 7,000 children living in poverty. The Authority has a population of around 125,000 with around a fifth of that being school age children. There are 62 schools in the area and 49 responded (79%). The data showed that 13 children are withdrawn from Collective Worship and 9 are withdrawn from RE. 8 schools had at least one child withdrawn.

w/d from CW	w/d from RE
1	1
1	1
3	0
3	3
5	0
0	1
0	1
0	2

Although this is a very small sample, and from a specific area, it does provide the first attempt at a full data set for an area. It suggests that in this area, withdrawal from RE and Collective Worship is not a problem.

The schools were then asked about the reasons for the withdrawals and the provision that is made for these children. The most frequent reason was the family belonging to the Jehovah's Witness branch of Christianity. In one school, three such children are withdrawn from Christian festivals and collective worship only. They are able to learn about other religions. During assemblies that the children are withdrawal from the school facilitates the children working on Jehovah's Witness Bible story materials. The teacher and RE lead make parents aware of religious learning on half termly curriculum overviews, thus providing opportunities for parents to discuss the content and learning objectives with teachers. Similarly at the High school, a Jehovah's Witness child does Bible work supplied by family during RE lessons. In another school the children from two Jehovah's Witness families take part in RE lessons but do not attend the Community school's Christingle Service.

There was only one non-Christian example of withdrawal. The children of a Muslim family attend Collective Worship, but do not pray. Their parents are happy for the children to learn about other religions in RE and the children take part in activities related to Christian festivals such as Christmas plays and parties.

One parent cited Atheist beliefs as the reason that their child does not take part in RE lessons and collective worship. It was unclear what provision was made for the child during these times. In one school two children from one family were withdrawn from a visit to a mosque, although the parents happy for child to learn about Islam in school.

### *Conclusion*

This small survey has shown that in one LA withdrawal from RE and Collective Worship is not a large scale problem. If this sort of survey was replicated in other English LAs, it may be possible to ascertain whether this pattern is replicated nationally and whether there is a problem with withdrawal as some have suggested.

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