

**Some initial reflections on the Gwynedd Education Department Schools Service
Collective Worship Policy 2010**

Discussion paper prepared for SACRE

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Task: Review the Collective Worship policy.

Background

The current situation is intolerable: the law on Collective Worship is uncompromising in its requirements but entirely out of step with the current situation in Wales. Furthermore, it appears that both Welsh and Westminster Governments have no current desire to devote any time to changing the law. In addition, the Inspection system appears to effectively condone those schools who effectively disregard the provisions of the legislation. It seems that the Collective Worship policy is regularly ignored by schools, Estyn and indeed the Governments.

SACRE appears to be unique in that, due to its legal obligation, it is active in ensuring that the law is implemented. If so, what action should SACRE be taking?

Some questions

Why are our governments not taking action on a matter that is fundamentally about wellbeing and mental health, identity, young people's relationships with themselves, others and indeed the world?

What are the responses of the Church and other Christian bodies to the current situation? Current legislation disproportionately favours the Christian faith beyond any other religious or humanist organisation so it would be logical to expect these bodies to lead on change. Humanist organisations have been unsuccessful to date in their attempts to change legislation, even though their arguments are reasonable and supported by many across different faith communities.

Is there a purpose therefore in reviewing this policy or should we wait until the law changes, or until there is an appetite for change beyond Gwynedd SACRE?

Current Concerns: Rationale for considering changes to the Collective Worship Policy

We suggest that there is an ethical content to the Collective Worship policy as it makes an attempt to meet spiritual needs. Collective Worship has a role in the development of a value base and a moral compass in children and young people. As such, the policy and its practice have an influence on the mental health and wellbeing needs of children and young people, asking and answering, if possible, those eternal questions about who we are, where are we going? Identity, our place in the universe, how we behave around other people, understanding ourselves and how we behave towards our fellow creatures and the planet.

The current crisis in young people's mental health suggests that we ignore children and young people's spiritual needs at our peril, so we suggest that we write to WG to ask them to take this matter seriously and review the Collective Worship legislation as a matter of urgency.

Christianity is only one of many different faiths and ideologies in Wales, and therefore we suggest that we should address the issue of collective worship being seen as Christian, or mostly Christian. We have changed the membership of SACRE to include representatives of other religions as well as the humanist community, and any attempts to create a policy for schools on collective worship, or "inclusive assemblies" as the Wales humanists suggest, must therefore reflect the diverse faith communities living in Wales today.

In addition, it is suggested that it would be useful for children and young people of all ages within a school to gather together, even if it's only once a week, rather than only to meet in classes or year groups. It is suggested that children and young people learn from each other, and that there is value in the whole school community coming together. This is already stated in the current policy: "Inclusive Collective Worship... promotes the sense of community in the school" (p.2). The emphasis should be as much on values and spirituality as on specific religious traditions.

Actual assembly content should be addressed by teachers or those who have expertise in these matters. The assembly content aspects of the policy should therefore be undertaken by those who are currently involved in leading assemblies, supported by faith and humanist practitioners who could be available as consultants.

We have a real opportunity here to make a difference to children and young people's mental health, identity, and sense of relationship with themselves and the world and engage in some real debate about what matters. We look forward to further discussion on this important issue.

Recommendations

Options for consideration by SACRE

Option 1: Do nothing

Option 2: Tinker with an out of date Collective Worship policy.

Advantages: SACRE meets its legal obligation.

Disadvantage: an opportunity for real change is missed.

Option 3: Write to Welsh Government to request that they take the issue of collective worship or assembly seriously and review the Collective Worship legislation as a matter of urgency.

Advantage: potential for real change if matter taken seriously.

Disadvantage: will take a long time.

Option 4: A compromise? Write to Welsh Government AND create a new policy that takes children and young people's mental health, spiritual and moral needs seriously. A policy that is written by those who undertake these tasks within school environments regularly. A policy that values the idea of a whole-school community.

Further thoughts

We are keen to contact schools in Gwynedd to identify what are current practices. We believe that this may have been carried out by SACRE in the past? We are also keen to approach Church bodies, so that they themselves can campaign for change.

We submit these thoughts, ideas and options for consideration at the SACRE meeting. We suggest that SACRE considers some or all of these options for action and welcome any alternative options.

Diolch yn fawr

Nick ac Elin