

Directors of Education

Headteachers of all schools

Our ref:

21 February 2011

CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE - PROVISION OF RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE IN SCHOOLS

Dear Colleague

Introduction

1. The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 continues to impose a statutory duty on local authorities to provide religious observance in Scottish schools. This letter replaces guidance previously contained within Circular 1/2005 and reflects the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence across all of Scotland's schools.

2. This letter clarifies the current position regarding the provision of religious observance in Scottish schools and sets out action for local authorities in planning the provision of religious observance. The Circular has been updated to reflect the adoption of Curriculum for Excellence and applies to all primary and secondary schools, including special schools. It is intended to assist local authorities and schools in the delivery of religious observance and sets out the continuing statutory requirements regarding its provision.

3. The policy on religious and moral education in non-denominational schools and religious education in Roman Catholic schools is covered in a separate letter which will be issued in conjunction with this.

Background

4. Scotland is a society with a longstanding Christian tradition. However, Scotland has for many generations also been home to many who have other faith and belief traditions, never more so than at present. This trend is likely to continue as Scotland remains a country where people from other communities are welcomed and we can expect Scotland to become increasingly diverse in the range of faith and belief traditions represented. Religious observance needs to be developed in a way which reflects and understands this diversity. It should be sensitive to our traditions and origins and should seek to reflect these but it must equally be sensitive to individual spiritual needs and beliefs, whether these come from a faith or non-faith perspective.

The Religious Observance Review Group Report (2004)

5. The recommendations of the Religious Observance Review Group outlined sensitive and tactful solutions which will allow schools to provide religious observance which is an inclusive, valuable and meaningful experience for all. Scottish Government Ministers consider religious observance to be an important educational experience for children and young people at all stages of primary and secondary school. In accepting the Group's recommendations, Ministers believe that learning and teaching can build on Scotland's strong Christian traditions without compromising them, while also promoting the understanding of, and respect for other faiths and beliefs.

6. However, Scottish Government Ministers also recognise that whilst the Education (Scotland) Act uses the term religious observance, and as a consequence both Scottish Government and its partners (LTS and HIMIE for example) use the same terminology, schools may feel a different name for the events that meet their religious observance requirements will be more appropriate to their context and culture. This is to be encouraged but needs careful thought and if possible some external reference point. For example, in a non-denominational school, the use of the title Time for Reflection might be appropriate because it is a clear description of the activity. This term is also used in other contexts, such as the Scottish Parliament.

7. Scottish Government Ministers also accept the definition and aims of religious observance proposed by the Review Group as being:

"community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school's community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community".

Approach

8. Religious observance has an important part to play in the development of the learner's four capacities: a successful learner, confident individual, responsible citizen and effective contributor. It should also provide opportunities for the school community to reflect upon and develop a deeper understanding of the dignity and worth of each individual and their contribution to the school and wider communities.

9. Scottish Government Ministers welcome the tradition that, in Roman Catholic denominational schools, Catholic Liturgy will largely shape the nature and frequency of religious observance activities in the classroom and in the wider school

community. So, at times, children and young people will be invited to participate in, and sometimes to lead, prayer and reflection in classrooms and at assemblies. At other times, to honour particular occasions or feasts, chaplains will lead school communities in the celebration of Mass and other forms of liturgical celebration.

10. In recognition of Scotland's Christian heritage, non-denominational schools are also encouraged to draw upon the rich resources of this tradition when planning religious observance. However, many school communities contain pupils and staff from faiths other than Christianity or with no faith commitment, and this must be taken fully into account in supporting spiritual development. It is of central importance that all pupils and staff can participate with integrity in forms of religious observance without compromise to their personal faith.

11. At present in non-denominational schools, assemblies are the most common vehicle for delivering religious observance. There should be a clear distinction between assemblies devised for the purpose of religious observance and assemblies for other purposes such as celebrating success. The precise form of religious observance will be determined by each school's policy within the local authority's framework, but these might include opportunities for class, year, stage or whole school observance as well as involvement by pupils and others, including school chaplains and other faith leaders, in planning and presentation.

Frequency of Religious Observance

12. Religious observance needs to take place sufficiently frequently to have an impact on the spiritual development of the school community. It is, however, the quality of such occasions which is of greatest importance.

13. There is a need to balance the frequency which would make a positive impact on children and young people with the need to ensure that the experiences are valuable and inclusive. This will require careful planning by schools. Every school should provide opportunities for religious observance at least six times in a school year, in addition to traditional celebrations central to the life of the school community, and preferably with greater frequency. We recognise that many primary schools value weekly religious observance as part of their regular assembly programme and will wish to continue with this. The school community should be involved in making decisions about frequency.

Parental Right to Withdraw

14. There is a statutory provision for parents to withdraw children from participation in religious observance. This right should always be made known to parents and their wishes respected. Parents should be provided with sufficient information on which to base a decision.

15. Scottish Government Ministers consider that religious observance complements religious education and is an important contribution to pupils' development. It should also have a role in promoting the ethos of a school by bringing pupils together and creating a sense of community. Schools are therefore encouraged to inform parents of this without applying pressure to change their minds.

16. Where a child is withdrawn from religious observance, schools should make suitable arrangements for the child to participate in a worthwhile alternative activity. In no circumstances should a child be disadvantaged as a result of withdrawing from religious observance.

17. 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 from all experiences which are influenced by the school's faith character.

Chaplains and Other Faith Group Leaders

18. Scottish Government Ministers value the important and varied contributions that chaplains and other faith group leaders make to the life of the school, for example in their involvement in religious observance, acts of worship, religious and moral education and a broader pastoral role. Headteachers are encouraged to engage in full discussion with chaplains and other faith group leaders in the planning and the implementation of religious observance. In supporting religious observance, their own religious beliefs should be respected and they should not be asked, or expected, to compromise them.

Religious Observance and Worship in schools

19. The Religious Observance Review Group considered the relationship between organised acts of worship and religious observance. They concluded with the following statement:

"Where the school community, whether denominational or non-denominational, is continuous with a faith community, that community's faith in the focus of worship, may be assumed and worship may be considered to be appropriate as part of the formal activity of the school. Where, as in most non-denominational schools, there is a diversity of beliefs and practices, the Review Group believes that the appropriate context for an organised act of worship is within the informal curriculum as part of the range of activities offered for example by religions, non-religious groups, chaplains and other faith leaders."

20. Ministers endorse this approach as complementary to schools' policy on religious observance and would ask schools to consider this statement when planning for religious observance.

21. Members of the school community, including pupils, parents and representatives of faith groups and communities, may wish to have opportunities for organised acts of worship within the informal curriculum of the school. Ministers would encourage headteachers to consider these requests positively and make suitable arrangements if appropriate support arrangements can be provided.

Facilities

22. Consideration should be given to providing appropriate facilities in schools for acts of religious observance and worship. Locations need to be considered in the light of the size and diversity of participating groups. Locations for religious observance and worship should be considered in the planning and design of new

and refurbished school buildings, to provide facilities which meet school and community needs.

Support

23. Glasgow University, Scripture Union Scotland and the Church of Scotland have created a learning opportunity to assist school staff, chaplains and other faith group leaders in the delivery of religious observance.
www.gla.ac.uk/departments/religiouseducation

24. Learning and Teaching Scotland website offers guidance and exemplar materials to support schools in developing high quality activities for education about faith and belief, and for religious observance.
www.ltscotland.org.uk/religiousobservance

25. The Scottish Catholic Education Service offers guidance and exemplar materials to support denominational schools on aspects of religious observance and School Chaplaincy.
www.sces.uk.com

Conclusion

26. Local authorities and schools are invited to:

- work with the school community to plan the content, frequency and location of religious observance, in line with this advice note and the Review Group report;
- review their policies on religious observance, and develop practice in line with this advice note, the Review Group report and Curriculum for Excellence; and
- introduce necessary changes into planning processes as soon as possible.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laura Stewart', with a large, stylized initial 'L'.

Laura Stewart