

BHA BRIEFING 2010: Children, Schools and Families Bill.

Lords 2nd Reading

Monday 8th March

Briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA): Reforming collective worship in England

Background

The BHA campaigns for inclusive school assemblies and against 'collective worship' in school, which excludes and offends many and is a matter of concern to teachers and head teachers, parents and pupils, and many religious people and organisations as well as humanists. We believe that the parental right to excuse their child and the right for sixth formers to excuse themselves is not a proper or satisfactory solution.

In England all state maintained schools are legally required to provide daily collective worship for all their pupils. In community schools the majority of the acts of daily collective worship that are provided in a given term are legally required to be of a 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'¹. In foundation schools with a religious character and voluntary schools, the collective worship should be provided in accordance with the school's trust deed. Where a deed does not make such provision, the worship should be provided in accordance with the tenets and practices of the religion or religious denomination of the school, as specified by order of the Secretary of State for Education.

Why is this a problem?

A school community may do many things together but, lacking a shared religion, it cannot worship collectively. In requiring schools to do so, the law is incoherent. On the other hand, good educational assemblies can accomplish much.

Although the law on collective worship is clear, it is widely ignored, which is clearly very unhealthy in a democratic society. OFSTED's 2002-03 annual report, for example, states that 'four fifths of schools do not hold a daily act of collective worship for all pupils'.

There is widespread dissatisfaction over the current law and support for its reform. In 1998 there was a national consultation² held by the Religious Education Council, the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education and the Inter-Faith Network which proposed reform based on a statutory requirement for regular assemblies of a spiritual and moral character in place of the present act of worship. Such a reform was supported not only by all the major teaching unions and by religious and secular groups such as the Methodist Church, the Buddhist Society, the British Humanist Association, the Sikh Education Council and the Board of Deputies of British Jews, but by parent and local government groups, and by professional RE associations such as the Professional Council for RE, the Conference of University Lecturers in RE and the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants.

¹ Education Reform Act 1988. Available at http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1988/ukpga_19880040_en_2

² *Collective Worship Reviewed* (1998). Available at http://www.culham.ac.uk/Res_conf/cw_reviewed/index.html

What do we want?

We are strongly in favour of inclusive school assemblies, which can help to build shared values and a sense of community. We oppose acts of collective worship in school, since these exclude many, and believe that the parental right of excusal is not a proper solution.

We would like to see the immediate withdrawal of the government's statutory guidance on collective worship contained in the document *Circular 1/94*³ (which insists on a narrow interpretation of the legal requirement for "broadly Christian" worship) in favour of new guidance from the DCSF recommending inclusive assemblies, suitable for all. This should be followed by repeal of the legislation requiring acts of worship in schools and for them to be replaced with flexible requirements for them to provide school assemblies that focus on shared values. We believe that schools however, should provide time and space for optional worship to for those who want it.

Please raise this issue at Second Reading of the Children, Schools and Families Bill, making the point that we regret yet another opportunity to reform this law has been lost.

For more information, please contact Paul Pettinger, Education Campaigns Officer, on paul@humanism.org.uk or 020 7462 4991.

³ Available at http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/5670/310194%20R%20E%20and%20Collective%20Worship%20circular%201-94%20final.pdf