

# ***Edinburgh Secular Society***

Challenging religious privilege

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## **Submission of Supplemental Evidence in Support of Ms Veronica Wikman's Petition concerning Religious Observance in Schools**

Edinburgh Secular Society (ESS) has actively supported the motion that is before the Petitions Committee in the name of Ms Veronica Wikman.

ESS is strongly in favour of freedom of all forms of expression, including religious expression, and is strongly in favour of school pupils being educated about different religions and about humanism, atheism and secularism.

ESS is, however, against using public-funded institutions to propagate religious beliefs or to practise religious rituals.

**We respectfully remind members of the key issue raised by this petition before City of Edinburgh Council (CEC). It is not whether religious observance (RO) in 'non-denominational' city schools within its responsibility should be required, but rather whether CEC should conduct a ballot to allow their electors in the city to determine whether they wish religious observance in city schools be discontinued.**

ESS suggests that all members of CEC make a final decision on the proposal, rather than transferring the responsibility to a committee or sub-committee of the council.

Public confidence in the Council would be gravely undermined if the Education, Children and Families Committee (ECFC) of the Council alone make a final decision on this petition. This committee's membership includes three unelected external members nominated by religious denominations, all of whom are Christian, and must be regarded therefore as having a conflict of interest in any decision. Whatever public confidence there is currently in the ECFC of the city council will probably have been undermined further by the revelation in the papers of this year's Church of Scotland Assembly that: "three church representatives hold the balance of power on 19 local authority committees."<sup>1</sup>

The existence of substantial public support for the petition, evident in the large number of city electors signing it, suggests that there is sufficient public disquiet with the practice of religious observance in city schools, and that electors should be given the opportunity to vote on whether it should be discontinued.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/13790/3\\_CHURCH\\_and\\_SOCIETY\\_2013.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/13790/3_CHURCH_and_SOCIETY_2013.pdf) (paragraph 11.4.3)

Additionally, the existence of a counter petition to retain religious observance in city non-denominational schools, which has considerable support, suggests that public opinion on the matter is divided and that it is best resolved by a ballot of electors.

We ask that you consider the supplementary evidence attached to this letter, and that you reach a decision to support the petition.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary McLelland". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Gary McLelland

22 May 2013

Chair Edinburgh Secular Society

## **Supplemental Evidence: Petition concerning Religious Observance in Schools**

### **Statistical Evidence**

In the 2001 census, 28 per cent of Scots declared that they had no religion. In 2011, according to the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey<sup>2</sup>, 53 per cent of Scots now have no religious faith. In Edinburgh, 37 per cent of the population reported that they had no religion (2001 census) – a figure in contrast to 28 per cent nationally (City Council 2003<sup>3</sup>, Scottish Government 2005<sup>4</sup>). Currently, then, the City of Edinburgh is likely to have a majority of its population with no religious affiliation. Note, too, that Church of Scotland ministers, who conduct a large portion of the religious observance (RO) in city schools, represent a denomination that, according to the 2011 survey data, has the adherence of only 22 per cent of the Scottish population.

That such a large proportion (probably a majority) of the Edinburgh population has no religion, and that there is such diversity of forms of religious faith, suggest that it is impossible to find forms of religious observance in schools that would be acceptable to all. It indicates city schools should discontinue the practice of religious observance.

Any form of religious observance in city schools can be considered as a form of indoctrination, which privileges one or two forms of religious expression over many others. Time engaged in religious observance by pupils would be better spent learning about the full range of religious and belief diversity, rather than focusing on the practice of one among numerous denominations or sets of beliefs.

### **Religious Organisations in Schools**

It is the policy of City of Edinburgh Council that: 1) head teachers are encouraged to appoint a chaplain or chaplaincy; and, 2) there will be a minimum of six religious observance opportunities per year for each pupil. The council's own school inspection reports (available on its web site) illustrate the very close relationships built up by chaplains with their schools to which they are attached. These are non-denominational schools where one might reasonably query why chaplains are or need to be appointed.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2013/scottish-social-attitudes-and-other-news/>

<sup>3</sup> City of Edinburgh Council 2003 report dated 8 May 2003 (CEC/01/03-04/CSItem5e)

<sup>4</sup> Scottish Government 2005 'Analysis of Religion in the 2001 census' <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/02/20757/53568>

Further, there is clear evidence that religious organisations, using the access to schools RO affords them, extend their participation and influence into many other aspects of school life.

In some cases, chaplains appear to have taken on the role of classrooms assistants or supply teachers. For example, with regard to Flora Stevenson Primary School in Stockbridge/Comely Bank:

*“The school chaplain provides a very positive contribution to many aspects of school life by his involvement in school assemblies, religious and moral education (RME), support work in class and supporting and sharing in the residential experiences provided by the school.”<sup>5</sup>*

In another example, an extract from the report on Morningside Primary states:

*“There are regular opportunities for religious observance, including assemblies and celebrations in local churches. Local chaplains provide helpful support to the school including working with children.”<sup>6</sup>*

Indeed, Scripture Union Scotland and the Church of Scotland have a joint programme entitled ‘*Serve Your Local School*’ (SYLS)<sup>7</sup> which specifically encourages Christians to offer their services to both Primary and Secondary Schools. The Scripture Union claims over 2000 volunteers<sup>8</sup> actively participate in the programme, with Christians offering to assist schools in various ways, including, on residential trips, sports days and as classroom assistants.

However, evidence would strongly suggest that the true motivation behind religious organisations participation in RO and SYLS-type programmes is to proselytise. The Scripture Union’s web site, on its home page, states:

*“Help us plant seeds of faith in children and young people living near you! Do you long for more children and young people in your local area to know about God, and how much he loves them?”<sup>9</sup>*

In a recent interview, Wayne Dixon, a Scripture Union development worker, stated:

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<sup>5</sup> Sub-committee on educational standards: Central and south 17June 2003

<sup>6</sup> [www.edinburgh.gov.uk/downloads/meetings/id/3781/south\\_morningside\\_primary\\_school\\_and\\_nursery\\_class-school\\_inspection](http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/downloads/meetings/id/3781/south_morningside_primary_school_and_nursery_class-school_inspection)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.syls.org.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.suscotland.org.uk/volunteers-and-training/about-volunteering/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.scriptureunion.org.uk/8.id>

*“However, generally speaking our children / young people aren’t coming to our churches but 99% of them are in school. We do well to be there and to encourage others to be there serving in a variety of ways. My hope – prayer – role is that by being in school and being myself I can share something of Jesus that will connect with some of this 96% and my feedback – gut reaction is that this is welcomed. I’m just an ordinary guy who is a Christian and I want to dispel some of the misconceptions young people have about Jesus and Christianity so at least they will give Jesus a thought. I thank God that schools have been welcoming and allowed me and others in to do just this.”<sup>10</sup>*

Moreover, the Scripture Union openly promotes a programme within schools called ‘Hanging About Ministry – HAM’<sup>11</sup>. Worryingly, this programme encourages Christian volunteers, who often gain access to school under an RO remit, to address and interact with pupils, unsupervised, in areas of the school such as common rooms, dining halls, sports days and class registration. Wayne Dixon, a strong proponent of HAM, states:

*“I turn up, sign in and have a ‘plan’. Usually I start in the common room before lunch, as there are usually students around and we chat about, well, anything and everything! Then the lunch bell goes and I’m out of the common room and starting my routine. I may start with lunch, where I sit with some students and chat and eat. Then I go on a walk about. There are usually some specific groups of young people whom I try to meet up with and catch up with, and this is just great. Then there is the unusual – the unplanned, but always very interesting. You should always expect the unexpected!”*

### **Edinburgh Parents**

The evidence we have presented in this paper clearly illustrates that proselytising and indoctrination are core to religious organisations aims when gaining access to schools. It is no surprise then, that there is considerable disquiet amongst many Edinburgh parents regarding RO and the influence it allows certain religious groups over their children.

Since the launch of this petition, to allow a ballot on the discontinuance of Religious Observance from Edinburgh schools, ESS has received communications from a cross-section of the Edinburgh-based public. Examples are show below:

- 1) Submitted 24/02/13:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.schoolswork.co.uk/thinking/entry/interview-with-wayne-dixon/>

<sup>11</sup> [www.scriptureunion.org.uk/Uploads/.../Schools\\_hanging\\_around.pdf](http://www.scriptureunion.org.uk/Uploads/.../Schools_hanging_around.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Name and address held by ESS

*“My son is in Primary 2 at a non-denominational school, he is my first child so this is really the first dealings I have had with school life after leaving my school days behind me many years ago. Anyway, I have found out that the school chooses to have the Primary 7 leaving ceremony in the local parish church; I have approached the Parent Council about this and have met with some real boundaries and a lot of resistance. I choose to live life without religion I don’t see why a school, especially non-denominational are having a leaving ceremony in a Christian place of worship as that is not at all inclusive for all students especially taking into account the school’s multicultural and diverse make-up of the current pupils attending.*

*I understand the whole ‘opt out’ option but I don’t see why my son should have to miss out on a ‘right of passage’ and important end to his primary school years especially when the school is non-denominational”.*

2) Submitted 22/02/13:<sup>13</sup>

*“Heard Neil Barbour (ESS Media Officer) on the radio this morning and couldn’t agree more. I am aware that the Parent Council at Ratho Primary have raised the issue with the local minister coming into the school on a regular basis”.*

3) Submitted 22/02/13:<sup>14</sup>

*“Your Evening News article is circulating in the Edinburgh Liberal Jewish Community and a number of us have signed your petition today”*

## **Religious Observance ‘Opt –out’ Option for Parents**

There is provision within the current legislation for parents to withdraw a child from Religious Observance. However, this places the parent in an intolerable position of having to decide whether to remove their child from its peer group, or to subject the child to religious influences contrary to their wishes.

This position was the one Veronica Wikman found herself in as a mother of a primary school child in Edinburgh. Indeed, this was the motivation behind her submission of the petition to the Council calling for the removal of RO from

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<sup>13</sup> Name and address held by ESS

<sup>14</sup> Name and address held by ESS

Edinburgh schools.

Ms Wikman states:

*“Parents are put in the impossible situation of having to choose between having their children indoctrinated, or, having their children punished for their refusal to have them indoctrinated. Why should I, as a parent, be forced to give the churches "shared custody" of my child in exchange for a state education? This is of course an intolerable situation. Religious observance is a vehicle for religious indoctrination, no matter how many layers of euphemistic language are painted over it to disguise that fact. It is clearly indefensible and should have no place in state education in a democracy.”<sup>15</sup>*

Another Edinburgh parent wrote this articulate and passionate account, published in the Edinburgh Evening News, of her experiences and feelings towards the opt-out option:

*“Would you punish your child for not believing in God?*

*We have a system in our schools at present that provides all children, regardless of religion or lack of religion, with regular contact with a Church of Scotland minister, and what can often amount to a sermon several times a year. In many schools children may also be invited to pray.*

*You may be perfectly happy with this; you may know about it and object to it; but mostly parents just do not know because it is not something most schools make clear. Schools are allowed to not make this clear because the regulations controlling it are not very clear.*

*What happens if you are not happy with this system? Well, luckily for you, you can remove your child from these Religious Observance events, and have your child wait around somewhere else, maybe by themselves, but certainly separated from their friends and the school community. But hold on, isn't that what schools use as a consequence of a child's continuous or unacceptable bad behaviour?*

*School discipline and exclusion:<sup>16</sup>*

*‘Schools have a legal right to impose reasonable sanctions if a pupil misbehaves. Sanctions a school might use include:*

*a reprimand*

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<sup>15</sup> Veronica Wikman submitted to ESS 20/02/13

<sup>16</sup> UK Government, [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)

*a letter to parents or carers  
removal from a class or group*

*So, there we are. We are not going to do this to our children, or not till they are old enough to choose for themselves and realise this is not a punishment. We are not going to do this because we care about our children's feelings. Schools and Education Authorities also claim to care about these kinds of feelings, but not enough to object to such a system, which clearly does not put children first and really does not offer parents any sensible way out. It manipulates a parent's natural concern to ensure there is no challenge to a system which is clearly not inclusive or equal.*

*What kind of a parent would you have to be to remove your child? Unless you are of a different faith, it seems a bit fanatical to remove your child. You don't want to make a huge affair of it but you have to. You have to openly and obviously reject religion, using your child as proof of your fervour but in fact all you want to do is bring up your child according to your own beliefs. If you could show your preference to not have your child automatically enrolled in a more discreet, less seemingly confrontational way, would you? You don't have to be any kind of fanatic to see this is not a good system. You are not trying to pass judgement on anyone's religion; you have decided it is not part of what you want for your family. You are not trying to put into a child's head that Christianity and the Minister are so fearsome they are to be avoided in such a way, just that they shouldn't be seeking your children out at school with their message. The model of walking out when you don't agree with what someone says is not really to be encouraged at school, or ever in life, so why is it being offered as a viable option to parents?*

*Schools shouldn't be given the role of endorsing religions, only teaching about them. Who is allowing this system to continue through every kind of school review when it seems to contravene so many clauses concerning children's and parental rights?"<sup>17</sup>*

Both these Edinburgh mothers accounts, and the previous evidence regarding the pervasive influence religious organisations can have in many areas of school life, raise some fundamental questions:

- 1) *How can a parent withdraw their child from RO, when under that heading, religion is allowed to influence and impact on so many aspects of school life?*
- 2) *What of the rights of the child to an education free from religion influence?*

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<sup>17</sup> Name and address held by ESS – submitted 2011

## Legal

In relation to the legal position of a right to an education free from religion, human rights group Liberty has the under-noted comments regarding education:

*“While education is recognised as a right of the child, international and domestic human rights law have tended to focus disproportionate on the rights of parents to control the content of their children’s education. For example, Article 2, Protocol 1 of the Convention states that everyone has a right to education and then goes on to say that the State has an obligation to respect the rights of parents to ensure that education and teaching of their children is in conformity with the parents’ religious and philosophical convictions. The emphasis on the rights of parents as consumers in education law and policy is problematic because it dilutes the child’s right to an education and it discourages acceptance of children’s right to participate. The Joint Committee on Human Rights has expressed concerns about the inadequacy of recent education legislation, in light of Article 12 UNCRC.”<sup>18</sup>*

There is some concern that the current RO rules are in conflict with the specific obligation to *“respect the rights of parents to ensure that education and teaching of their children is in conformity with the parents’ religious and philosophical convictions”*

## Conclusions

ESS reiterates its support for the teaching of Religious & Moral Education to all school pupils.

We believe there is compelling evidence that makes the continued practice of enforced Religious Observance in Edinburgh schools unsustainable. The statistical data clearly indicates a decline in religious belief and this trend is likely to continue. The likelihood is that more and more Edinburgh parents will challenge enforced observance as they disengage from religion.

The pervasive nature of some religious Christian organisations within general schools life, often under a remit of delivering RO, effectively nullifies the opt-out option for parents. In addition, we have concerns that RO over-rides the rights of a child to an education free from religion.

Accordingly, ESS supports the petition of Ms Wikman. ESS endorses the opportunity it affords city electors to decide by ballot whether the very questionable practice of religious observance in state-funded, non-denominational city schools

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.yourrights.org.uk/yourrights/the-rights-of-children-and-young-people/education/index.html>

should be continued.

\*\*\*\* **END** \*\*\*\*