



William Powell AM
Chair - Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales

Your Ref: P-04-634

8 July 2015

Dear Mr Powell,

Many thanks for your recent correspondence with Minister for Education and Skills with regard to the online petition I opened some months ago. Although I have not seen a copy of your correspondence, I have read the Minister's response and would like to submit the following responses. Before doing so, I would like to express my gratitude to the committee for considering my petition despite its relatively low signatory count. The petitions system is a commendable system for groups and individuals to express their democratic voice and plays a valuable role in the democratic landscape here in Wales.

I am aware that this petition addresses a sensitive area where many people, apparently including the Minister, have tread a well-worn path in debates on certain issues. I would like to stress that this petition comes not from an ideologue seeking the eradication of religion from state schools but from a secular parent who wishes their child to have an inclusive, high quality, state education where their absence of religion should not be an impediment. Neither should they (as an impressionable child) have to conform to a school's religious practices in order to play a full role in the school community.

In paragraph 3, the Minister launches a staunch defence of Religious Education in schools. This was not referred to in the original petition because I, like all parents, want our children to be educated fully about this world we share. An understanding of the role religion plays in societies around us is crucial to understanding them - for example the geopolitics of the Middle East - and I think secular children as well as children of faith value this equally. I think this may be an echo of previous debates the Minister has had in this area and I would discourage further consideration of this aspect of the Minister's response.

My experience with my daughter's school is brought sharply in to focus by paragraph 6 of the Minister's response. My deepest concerns relate to the introduction of religious practice as 'de rigeur' parts of school life (Christian prayer in classes, saying thanks to God before meals, teaching of Bible stories as truth). As my daughter, like most children, is keen to learn and follow the guidance of her teachers, she adopted these practices as part of daily life. It was her bringing these practices into our secular household that initially triggered my exploration of these issues with the school.

In paragraph 6, the Minister says:

"...those leading collective worship in schools should be sensitive to the range of beliefs and non-beliefs held by pupils in the school."

I think this raises a very interesting question. How do those who lead collective worship become aware of the range of beliefs and non-beliefs held by pupils in the school? Because of the age of

their pupils, it surely can't be from the children themselves. As parents, we are asked many questions about our child but religious activity is not one of them so the teachers cannot know from the parents. When my partner and I sent our daughter to school, we did so with the naiveté that we would be asked if the school was to do any religious activity, which obviously is not the case.

As a parent, I would strongly recommend that community schools should ask parents about religious preferences upon their child's registration. This would be one simple additional question which would protect the values of religious and non-religious families. It seems, at least, like good manners.

The Minister's position on collective worship is unambiguous, with "no plans" for change. However, in paragraph 7 he highlights one of the key discriminating elements of the current statute and legislation in this area.

He writes:

"The school may, in agreement with parents, provide alternative arrangements for worship for one or more pupils that are excused, but is not obliged to do so"

I would urge the committee to consider replacing religion with another aspect of equality legislation in this context. Imagine, for example, that this same attitude was applied to those with a physical disability thus:

"The school may, in agreement with parents, provide alternative access arrangements for one or more pupils that have mobility issues, but is not obliged to do so."

I think that instantly highlights that the tone of this guidance is incorrect and values the beliefs (or non-beliefs) of those who do not wish to participate in collective worship as less valuable or valid than those that do. I would encourage those responsible for this advice to reconsider its tone.

I would also ask for the Minister to consider the negative impact of exclusion from school's mandatory collective worship sessions may have on a child (potentially as young as 4 or 5). If he were to think about the emotional impact of this upon a child's development over time - on the basis of their non-belief - it asks serious questions about whether it ought be the only option for secular parents to take.

To distill the thoughts of a number of fellow parents, I would encourage the Minister to consider school environments as belief 'neutral' spaces. I don't think many would campaign for the 'completely non religious state schools' the Minister quite clearly opposes but I think many would agree that state schools should not demonstrate preference (or prejudice) about belief. Child of belief should be allowed and encouraged to practice their beliefs and those from secular backgrounds should be allowed to participate fully in school life without being imprinted by religious practice from the school.

I would refer the Minister to consider that, according to the ONS data, a quarter of the population have no formal religion and that Wales is the least religious part of England and Wales.

I hope that this response has been helpful and will facilitate further debate and progress in discussing this subject.

Kind regards,

Richard Martin