

**Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymchwiliad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#)
i [weithredu diwygiadau addysg](#)**

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) inquiry into [Implementation of education reforms](#)

IER 74

Ymateb gan: Y Gymdeithas Seciwlar Genedlaethol
Response from: National Secular Society

Introduction

1. This response is submitted on behalf of the National Secular Society (NSS) - a not-for-profit, non-governmental civil society organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. We advocate for separation of religion and state and promote secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. We seek a diverse society where all are free to practise their faith, change it, or to have no faith at all. And we uphold the universality of individual human rights, which should never be overridden on the grounds of religion, tradition, or culture.

Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE)

2. At the time of the introduction of the new Curriculum for Wales, we welcomed the emphasis on delivering a RVE syllabus and system that is pluralistic and balanced in nature – one that guarantees all children across Wales access to a religious and ethical education fit for the 21st century.
3. With this in mind, we have a number of recommendations regarding the implementation of the curriculum, the consistency and equity of learning opportunities for pupils across Wales, and further changes that are needed to ensure the balanced nature of RVE.



4. A welcome inclusion in Curriculum was the requirement to teach about nonreligious worldviews alongside major religions and to cover secularism as a key concept in RVE. Given the importance of these requirements, we recommend the Committee looks to assess the quality and effectiveness of teaching about secularism and nonreligious worldviews in RVE. In particular, the Committee should be concerned with the understanding of secularism amongst teachers. NSS-commissioned polling has shown the concept of secularism is poorly understood amongst the general public – this is likely also applicable to teachers, particularly if one considers that the requirement to teach about secularism and nonreligious worldviews was only recently introduced.
5. **In this regard, we recommend additional training and professional learning be made available to teachers to fill gaps in understanding of secularism and nonreligious worldviews as necessary.** The NSS has created a set of resources, 'Exploring Secularism'¹, aimed at teachers who wish to explore issues of religion, belief, ethics, and worldviews in school. We would be keen to assist in developing training and learning further.
6. At the time of the curriculum's introduction, we argued that removing the right of withdrawal from RVE was only appropriate if the subject was sufficiently critical, objective, and pluralistic. **We therefore recommend the Committee investigate what mechanisms are in place for assessing whether delivery of RVE meets these requirements, and whether such mechanisms are effective.**
7. This consideration is of additional importance in light of the continued involvement of SACREs and ASCs in RVE, which facilitate the influence of religious interest groups over school curricula. **The system of SACREs and ASCs is educationally inappropriate, and we repeat the recommendation made in our response to the consultation for the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 that the SACRE system be abolished.**
8. Whilst allowing schools the flexibility to formulate their own curricula was one of the intentions of the new Curriculum for Wales, we believe that a

¹ <https://exploringsecularism.org/browse-resources>



national agreed syllabus developed by educational experts with regard to statutory guidance is necessary in the case of RVE in order to prevent inappropriate control and influence by religious groups. **However, whilst the SACRE system persists, measures to ensure all agreed syllabuses are fully compliant with statutory Welsh Government RVE guidance should be undertaken.**

9. **We also recommend the Committee undertake to end the allowances that permit faith schools to teach confessional RVE, which prioritises one specific religion through the denominational syllabus.** As a result of these allowances, many pupils in Wales continue to be denied access to genuinely non-partisan and balanced education about religious and non-religious worldviews. We believe this should be the right of every child, irrespective of the type of school they attend.

10. Faith schools in Wales enjoy significant freedom to promote their religious ethos throughout school life. We continue to be concerned at the real possibility that some schools pressure parents to 'choose' the denominational RVE 'option' – or at least deter them from opting for the pluralistic model. As such, parents may feel uncomfortable about requesting a model of RVE different to the one supported by the school. The pluralistic model should be proactively offered to all parents, and not only offered upon request. Otherwise, there is a real risk that the agreed pluralistic RVE option may be under resourced and stigmatised. Furthermore, the fact that faith schools only have to develop the alternative syllabus if requested by parents creates an additional incentive for them to discourage requests. **At the very least, we recommend creating a duty on faith schools to develop the pluralistic option and to make it of equal worth.**

11. **We recommend the Committee look to assess the availability, quality, and provision of the pluralistic RVE model in schools with a designated religious character. This will enable it to form a judgement on the consistency and equity of learning opportunities regarding pluralistic RVE.**

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)



12. At the time of the new curriculum's introduction, we argued that the aims of RSE are undermined by continuing to allow faith schools to teach RSE according to the tenets of their faith. We recommend the Committee consider how the ongoing implementation of the curriculum may be undermining the wellbeing and inclusion of pupils, particularly those who are LGBT.
13. In our report 'Unsafe Sex Education: The risk of letting religious schools teach within the tenets of their faith, (Welsh appendix)'², we found that all secondary faith schools in Wales where an RSE policy was obtainable taught it in accordance with a faith ethos. The report details how this promotion of religious belief throughout RSE leads to the teaching of stigmatising and discriminatory attitudes about LGBT people, contraceptives and abortion. This included a case where a Welsh faith school had even lifted wording from Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which banned the 'promotion' of homosexuality, despite the law being repealed in 2003³.
14. The attitudes of the religious organisations which control Wales's faith schools remain unchanged. The continued freedom afforded to faith schools to promote their religious ethos in RSE is incompatible with full inclusion of LGBT pupils and families. This is borne out in polling on the views of teachers. A 2023 survey found one in three teachers feel faith acts as a 'barrier' to discussing LGBT topics in school; amongst those who work at faith schools, the number increased to almost half, with 46% feeling that faith impeded their ability to engage in open discussions⁴.
15. Last year, the Department for Education published three reports on RSE in England demonstrating how faith-based RSE is detrimental to the education and wellbeing of pupils⁵. This included some faith schools refusing to teach about same-sex marriage, and "really homophobic" external visitors being used to deliver lessons. Whilst these reports do not

² <https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/unsafe-sex-education-welsh-faith-schools-may-2018.pdf>

³ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2018/05/welsh-faith-schools-will-keep-distorting-sex-education-nss-warns>

⁴ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2023/02/a-third-of-teachers-say-faith-a-barrier-to-discussing-lgbt-issues>

⁵ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2024/10/religion-may-enable-homophobia-in-schools-reports-suggest>



look at Wales, Welsh and English faith schools enjoy similar freedoms to promote religious beliefs as part of RSE. **We therefore recommend the Committee consider how faith-based RSE is detrimental to the education and wellbeing of Welsh pupils in particular.**

16. The Curriculum for Wales, Relationships and Sexuality Education code requires that "curriculum content in RSE must be inclusive and reflect diversity"⁶. This requirement is incompatible with the continuation of faith-based RSE. As such, **we recommend the Committee explore options for ending the allowance for faith schools to teach RSE according to the tenets of their faith.**

Children's rights

17. The curriculum reform preserved the legal requirement on all schools in Wales to hold a daily act of collective worship that is 'broadly Christian' in character. This law is unpopular, exclusionary, and a poor use of a school's time. It also enables inappropriate evangelism by religious groups in schools.
18. NSS-commissioned polling found 70% of senior leaders at primary and secondary schools in England "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with collective worship laws. Just 12% of senior leaders support the current law⁷. The figures were broadly similar for senior leaders at schools with and without a religious character. The NSS has also obtained previously unreleased polling from a 2022 survey of over 7,600 teachers by Teacher Tapp, which reveals 66% say their school does not hold collective worship. This includes 79% of teachers at schools without a religious character, and 11% at faith schools. Most teachers who say they do not hold collective worship are at secondary schools (84%).

⁶ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-01/curriculum-for-wales-relationships-sexuality-education-code.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2024/05/most-school-leaders-disagree-with-law-on-worship-poll-finds>



19. Whilst these figures are not specific to Wales, collective worship laws are identical between England and Wales, and there is good reason to think similar attitudes may be present amongst Welsh school leaders and teachers. The scale of noncompliance with the law on the part of schools suggests a law that is recognised as unfit for purpose.
20. As revealed in the 2021 Census, Christians are now a minority in Wales, decreasing from 58% of the population in 2011 to 44% in 2021⁸. In the same time period, the number of nonreligious Welsh people increased from 32% to 47% - making the nonreligious the largest religion or belief group in Wales. As with the rest of the UK, Wales also saw significant increases in minority religious groups.
21. These trends of demographic change are very likely to continue. In light of this, the continued existence of laws mandating daily acts of specifically Christian worship cannot be justified.
22. Furthermore, collective worship laws cannot be reconciled with the duty on headteachers and school governors to promote knowledge and understanding of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) among teachers and staff created by the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act. In the concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the UNCRC called on the UK to repeal "legal provisions for compulsory attendance in collective worship" in schools, guarantee "the right of all children to freedom of expression and to practise freely their religion or belief", and establish "statutory guidance to ensure the right of all children, including children under 16 years of age, to withdraw from religious classes without parental consent"⁹.
23. We have consistently observed how collective worship laws enable the activities of external evangelical groups seeking to promote religion to pupils. In the case of Llanidloes High School in Powys, these laws demonstrably facilitated a campaign of inappropriate evangelism and the

⁸ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2022/11/census-england-and-wales-less-than-half-the-population-christian>

⁹ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2023/06/end-faith-based-selection-in-schools-un-committee-urges>



promotion of creationism by the school's headteacher, Dan Owen^{10,11}. Following revelations of his efforts at proselytization, Owen explicitly justified his actions with reference to collective worship requirements, telling parents and carers the school is "careful to comply" with the law requiring daily acts of "broadly Christian" collective worship.

24. Owen sought to use his position of power at Llanidloes High School to promote his own personal religious beliefs amongst pupils. Whilst his actions are entirely inappropriate due to their disregard for the right to freedom of religion or belief of pupils and the nonreligious character of Llanidloes High School, collective worship laws provide legal coverage for his actions. Additionally, unlike in England, there exists no formal prohibition on the promotion of creationism in Welsh schools. We have written to the Welsh Government calling for the introduction of an explicit prohibition, and urge the Committee to support such efforts.

25. Laws mandating religious worship are incompatible with the right to freedom of religion or belief, and the changing nature of Wales's religious makeup. In light of this, we urge the Committee to recommend repealing laws requiring daily acts of collective worship.

¹⁰ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2024/06/nss-calls-for-creationism-ban-after-school-evangelism-revealed>

¹¹ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2024/07/powys-community-school-children-told-trust-god-not-feelings>

