

P-05-757 Remove the Obligation on Schools to Hold Acts of Religious Worship – Correspondence from the Petitioner to the Committee, 19.06.17

TO MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES' PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Dear Committee Members,

We are the organisers of the petition which reads: “We call on the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to pass a law that removes the obligation on schools to hold acts of religious worship”.

We are both Year 10 students at Ysgol Glantaf in Cardiff, and neither of us believe in God. As time went on, we became increasingly annoyed at being expected to say the Lord's Prayer in the regular school assemblies. It didn't seem right that we were expected to pray, and to say the words of the prayer, even though we are not Christian.

We mentioned this at home, and Rhiannon's Dad said that instead of just complaining, we should do something about it. He explained that the school was forced by law to hold religious assemblies and that there had to be acts of worship, which included praying.

He also explained that while it was possible for parents to withdraw their children from religious assemblies, he did not think this was a good idea because it is a good thing for there to be meetings where the whole school comes together.

He told us that the National Assembly has the power to change the law, and suggested we organise an online petition that could go to the Petitions Committee.

We met the Clerk to the Committee and he explained how the petitions system works.

We got the petition online and at first told our friends about it and asked them to sign. We put the petition on Facebook and it got more support.

Rhiannon's Dad also tweeted about it.

We also contacted the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association, and they asked their members in Wales to sign the petition.

We got some news coverage in Golwg, BBC Radio Wales, the South Wales Echo, and WalesOnline.

We would like to make it clear that our petition is not an attack on any religion. We respect people's right to believe what they like, and we are not saying that religion should not be taught in schools. Obviously it has played a big part in history and it is important to learn about it.

But learning about religion is different to being forced to pray or take part in an "act of worship". Religious worship has nothing to do with education, and we think schools should no longer be forced to organise it. People can pray at home, if they want to, or in church. We believe that acts of religious worship in state schools like ours go against the idea of secular education.

After there was some publicity about our petition, we were contacted by Dr Alison Mawhinney of Bangor University, who has done a lot of research on the subject. She told us that the Welsh Government should seriously consider changing the law.

One important point Dr Mawhinney made is that, in her opinion, forcing us to say a prayer against our will is a violation of our right to freedom of belief under Article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998. Yet that is what is happening under the current guidelines. We hope the Committee will take on board our concern over this point in particular.

We would like there to be a thorough review of the current law and guidelines. We would rather not have acts of worship in schools, but another solution could be that young people like us should ourselves have the right to withdraw from the religious worship part of assemblies. At present parents have to ask for children to be withdrawn. It would also be possible to have a system where prayers, for those who want to say them, could take place either at the very beginning or the very end of assemblies, so those who wanted to opt out could do so without missing the rest. But we don't think the current guidelines should continue.

We are aware that since we launched our petition, another one has been organised in favour of keeping the existing guidelines. Those signing the other petition have a right to their view, but we do not believe they have a right to impose their beliefs on others through forced praying.

We are disappointed by the response to our petition of Ms Kirsty Williams, the Cabinet Secretary for Education. We don't believe she has considered the human rights aspect of the issue at all.

We are very grateful to all who signed our petition and supported us, and hope members of the Committee will support our cause and suggest a way forward.

We are also grateful to the Committee Clerk for his advice.

Thank you and best wishes,

Rhiannon Shipton and Lily McAllister-Sutton