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SCHOOL WORSHIP

**Clarifying thinking, refining practice and preparing for
inspection**

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Transforming Secondary Education

Introduction

Acts of collective worship – traditionally called 'assemblies' by teachers and pupils alike – have long been a feature of British school life.

The 1944 Education Act simply stated that each school day should begin with an act of collective worship on the part of all pupils in attendance at the school. The daily requirement was restated in the 1988 Education Act which also set out a series of new legislative requirements concerning the organisation and character of collective worship.

The beginning of OFSTED inspections in 1993 (secondary schools) and 1994 (primary schools) put school collective worship 'under the spotlight'. For the first time, public judgements were made concerning the degree to which schools were complying with legislative requirements. Within Redbridge, the statements about collective worship within the OFSTED reports of borough schools were monitored carefully.

Statements within OFSTED reports revealed both variety in practice – which is proper given the extent to which collective worship reflects the ethos and traditions of particular schools – and variety of interpretation as to what exactly constitutes an act of collective worship.

In 1996, it was felt that the time was right to issue further guidance to schools in order to clarify issues relating to collective worship and, if appropriate, to help them prepare for an OFSTED inspection.

The guidance notes which follow were endorsed by Redbridge Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE).

The information and advice which is offered concerns the following:

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Being clear about what legislation requires

The legal requirements set out in the 1988 Education Reform Act have been analysed closely and at great length. Detailed notes on the clauses of the act are contained in *School Worship: Perspectives & Principles* published by Redbridge in October 1991. Non-statutory guidance on the meaning and application of the collective worship legislation was issued by the Department for Education in January 1994 in Circular 1/94, *Religious Education and Collective Worship*. However, some of the guidance relating to collective worship given in this circular has been considered at the best unworkable, at worst divisive, by many educational groups.⁽¹⁾

The legal requirements can be summarised as follows:

1. All registered pupils in LEA schools should take part in a daily act of collective worship unless wholly or partly withdrawn by parents. The term 'registered pupils' includes students up to and including the age of eighteen years in a school sixth form or at a sixth form college but not pupils in nursery schools or classes. Collective worship for special school pupils should be provided so far as practicable.
2. There can be a single whole school act of collective worship or separate acts for pupils in different age of school activity groupings.
3. Acts of collective worship can take place at any time of the school day and, with certain exceptions, should take place on the school premises.
4. In a community or foundation school (ie other than at LEA voluntary-aided schools), most acts of collective worship each term should be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character', that is, 'reflecting' the 'broad traditions of Christian belief without being denominationally biased. But acts of collective worship should also be appropriate, having regard to pupils' ages, aptitudes and family backgrounds.
5. If a community or foundation school believes that the Christian character clause (4 above) is inappropriate for the whole school or certain pupils within it, application can be made to the local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) for a determination to have that clause lifted or modified. Unless the school requests otherwise, a determination will be reviewed by the local SACRE after five years.
6. A determination does not lift the requirement for daily collective worship. Such worship must still be undenominational but may be distinctive of a particular faith.
7. Teachers – including head teachers – have the right to withdraw from collective worship (though, in voluntary schools, these conditions may vary) and cannot be discriminated against for so doing. Attending 'assemblies', on the other hand, is part of a teacher's contractual duty.
8. In a community or foundation school, it is the responsibility of a head teacher, in consultation with the governors, to see that these arrangements are carried out. In a voluntary-aided school, it is the responsibility of the governors, in consultation with the head teacher.

Drawing four sets of distinctions

The imprecise use of terms can sometimes both reveal and perpetuate imprecise understanding. It is important, then, to draw a distinction between:

- **collective worship and religious education (RE)**

Collective worship and RE are separate parts of school provision for which different legislative requirements apply. Time used for RE counts towards a school's total curriculum time whilst this is not the case for collective worship.

This is not to deny, of course, that there can be a fruitful interplay between RE and collective worship – as the 2001 Redbridge agreed syllabus makes clear:

'experiences in assembly and collective worship can contribute to learning in RE in particular and to spiritual and other kinds of development in general'

and

'assembly and collective worship might on some occasions make a useful contribution to a school's RE programme' (*Exploration & Response*, p4).

But OFSTED reports have sometimes pointed out that, when the distinction between collective worship and RE is blurred, the quality of both aspects of school provision can be lowered. *To guard against this, it is advisable for schools to have a policy on collective worship separate to that on RE.* In the same way, an increasing number of schools make a clear distinction between the roles of 'RE coordinator' and 'assembly coordinator';

- **collective worship and assembly ⁽²⁾**

Though the latter term has traditionally been used in schools, drawing a formal distinction between the two terms is important because

- there is no legislative requirement for schools to hold assemblies
- the right of withdrawal applies to collective worship but not assembly
- the term 'act of collective worship' carries implications for practice which the term 'assembly' does not;

- **corporate worship and collective worship**

There is an irreconcilable tension or paradox within the notion of 'school worship'. This might best be expressed as a question: how can a community which is not by nature religious (ie a school) meaningfully provide an activity called 'worship'?

It is now generally acknowledged ⁽³⁾ that the kind of 'worship' which a school is required to provide is not the same kind of activity as that found within a faith group. In order to stress this, the distinction is often made between

- 'corporate worship' (ie that kind of worship found within a religious community – a 'corpus' or body of believers – whose members meet voluntarily and for reasons of shared commitment)

and

- 'collective worship' (ie that kind of worship which legislation requires schools to provide, which should be consistent with educational aims,

and which involves a 'collectivity' of people with a range of religious commitments and none).

Legislation requires schools to provide *collective*, not *corporate* worship;

- **class-led and class-based acts of collective worship**

There is an ambiguity in the frequently used phrase 'class assembly' which is eliminated when a distinction is drawn between

- a *class-led* act of collective worship (ie when a class takes the lead role in an activity involving more than one class)

and

- a *class-based* act of collective worship (ie when the activity involves the single class group, probably in their class base).

Drawing up a policy document

It would be advisable for schools to draw up a policy document on collective worship which, like all effective policy documents:

- serves the purpose of clarifying, informing and guiding; and
- is marked by brevity, simplicity and clarity.

A policy document on collective worship might contain a number of elements.

1. **A brief statement about the nature and character of the school**

This is important in that the pattern and style of collective practice should reflect and 'speak to' the traditions and character of a particular school. Section 7 of the 1988 Act also requires that collective worship should be appropriate for the ages, aptitudes and family backgrounds of the pupils in the school.

2. **An explanation of the role that collective worship plays within the life of the school**

This can be done in a number of ways. For instance

- by listing a central *aim* and then a series of *objectives* eg

Collective worship occupies an important and unique place in the life of Nowhere Primary School. It provides an opportunity for members of the school community to pause from activity, to gather, to remind themselves of and to reflect upon the beliefs and values which bind the school community together. It also allows those with a religious commitment the possibility of entering into worship and those with no religious commitment to sense what worship is and to reflect deeply. In this way we aim both to affirm and to protect the integrity of all members of the school community.⁽⁴⁾

In particular, collective worship:

- *provides an opportunity for all members of the school community to stop activity, to pause and to reflect on important issues;*
- *builds up the sense of group identity;*
- *gives pupils the experience of being still or silent;*
- *provides an opportunity for celebrating times of success or joy;*
- *provides an opportunity for meeting at times of sadness or sorrow;*
- *provides an opportunity for highlighting and reflecting upon core school values – such as striving to be honest and truthful, trying hard in all*

- things, respecting oneself as well as other people, striving to be fair and just; and*
- *offers the opportunity to mark significant points in the year, such as festivals and school events.*

by giving examples of how collective worship contributes to the *spiritual, moral, social, cultural and intellectual* development of pupils ⁽⁵⁾ eg

Collective worship contributes to the spiritual development of pupils by providing them with an opportunity to:

- *reflect upon the value, purpose and meaning of things;*
- *experience times of quiet inactivity to counterbalance the activity which generally marks the rest of the school day ⁽⁵⁾; and*
- *hear stories and words from religious and other literature which suggest that there is more to life than meets the eye.*

Collective worship contributes to the moral development of pupils by providing them with an opportunity to:

- *reflect on matters concerning right and wrong;*
- *hear about incidents in which, and people in whom, goodness or right are exemplified; and*
- *learn about religious and other teachings concerning right and wrong.*

Collective worship contributes to the social development of pupils by providing them with an opportunity to:

- *gather with others for a common purpose;*
- *share times of joy and times of sadness with others; and*
- *learn how to behave appropriately within a specific social setting.*

Collective worship contributes to the cultural development of pupils by providing them with an opportunity to:

- *hear music from a range of times, places and cultures;*
- *reflect upon ideas concerning beauty and that which is pleasing to the eye and ear; and*
- *appreciate the range of talents and gifts found within the school community and beyond.*

Collective worship contributes to the intellectual development of pupils by providing them with an opportunity to:

- *learn and to engage with their minds;*
- *have ideas and beliefs confirmed or challenged; and*
- *reflect upon the nature of learning and education.*

3. **An outline of the pattern and structure for collective worship that has been created**

This might best be shown in the form of a grid that outlines the weekly structure eg

Day	Grouping	Venue	Time	Leadership	Style/Approach	Notes
Monday						
Tuesday						
Wednesday						
Thursday						
Friday						

Comment might also be made concerning other organisational aspects, such as the use made of themes and the role of the assembly coordinator.

4. **A brief explanation of how key aspects of the legislative requirements are being met**

The wording of key sections of the legislation demands interpretation and a school which is willing to indicate confidently its line of interpretation will be placing itself in a position of strength. Two clauses of the 1988 Act in particular call for interpretation:

- the requirement that, over a term, the majority of acts of collective worship are of a broadly Christian character

It has often been noted that the requirement is not that acts of collective worship should be narrowly or exclusively Christian, and that the requirement relates to Christian character rather than Christian content. Thus, a school could say that the broad Christian character is achieved in the majority of its acts of collective worship through, for example:

- *making reference to God or Jesus, when appropriate (but being sensitive to the nature of the school community and guarding against the assumption that simply to use such words somehow creates 'worship' or 'legality');*
- *encouraging a positive and responsible attitude to the environment;*
- *encouraging a quest for honesty, integrity, justice and truth;*
- *encouraging children to look beyond the obvious, the immediate and the material;*
- *encouraging love and respect for self and for the other person;*
- *encouraging service to others and to the community; and*
- *building Christian festivals into the yearly programme (which does not, of course preclude focusing on festivals from other traditions as well).*

- the requirement that acts of collective worship are appropriate for the ages, aptitudes and family backgrounds of pupils at the school

The reference to ages and aptitudes is a reminder that acts of collective worship should be both educational and meaningful. The fundamental way in which a school might take note of the children's family backgrounds (religious and non-religious) is by seeking to make collective worship as inclusive as possible. This might mean that a school:

- *recognises that there are many forms of commitment, religious and non-religious;*
- *recognises that there are many forms of religious commitment;*
- *has carefully chosen songs to use in collective worship (on the basis that some are more appropriate to the collective setting of a school);*
- *regards variety – in culture, religion and belief – as something to be acknowledged and explored rather than avoided and denied; and*
- *builds festivals from a variety of cultural and religious traditions into its yearly programme.*

In addition, a school might wish to state how it maintains in practice the distinction between 'collective worship' and 'assembly'

This might be, for example, by ensuring that the 'administrative' aspects (announcements etc) are clearly separated from the 'worshipful' elements. Some schools achieve this by having different people leading each element. In its simplest form, this might create the sequence: person A welcomes everybody, reminds them of the theme and introduces person B → person B leads the worshipful/reflective element → person A thanks person B and returns to normal routine through making announcements etc.

5. **A brief exploration of the relationship between collective worship and the school curriculum**

This statement might explore the idea that collective worship is in 'dialogue' with the curriculum ie

- *collective worship draws from the curriculum – by providing an opportunity to reflect on and highlight classroom work, for example; and*

collective worship feeds back into the curriculum – by providing ideas and suggestions which can be followed up in the classroom, for example.

A special relationship with religious education might be noted (in that beliefs and values will often be the focus of collective worship, as will celebration and festival) but it would also be proper to point out to teachers that this should not replace religious education within the classroom, a part of the school curriculum.

6. A policy statement concerning requests for withdrawal from collective worship

This statement might simply reiterate the right of parents wholly or partly to withdraw their children from collective worship (see page 3) and the right of teachers to withdraw. The statement might continue by stating:

- what a member of staff should do if a parent requests withdrawal either verbally or in writing; and
- what a member of staff considering withdrawal should do.

7. Any other policy statements which the school feels would be helpful

These might include policy statements on such issues as:

- prayer eg

The use of prayers from Christianity and other religious traditions has a place within school collective worship. However, leaders should be sensitive to the mixed nature of the school community and should be particularly careful with how prayers are introduced. School policy is that an 'invitation' to listen to the words of the prayer should be offered so that a variety of responses are possible – for example, "And now, in a moment of quietness, I want you to listen to some words which are very special for ... (eg Christians). Think about these words or other words which are special for you".

- visitors eg

The school has a long tradition of inviting visitors to contribute to or lead collective worship. However, it is important that visitors are chosen who:

- *understand the nature and purpose of collective worship and who will not, therefore, use the opportunity to preach or evangelise; and*
- *can communicate well with children.*

In arranging for a visitor to collective worship, it is important that teachers:

- *liaise with the school assembly coordinator;*
- *consider the format of the occasion (eg a talk by the visitor, interviewing the visitor);*
- *provide the visitor with all necessary information (the school statement about the purpose of collective worship, the relevant theme, the size and age-range of the group, timings, equipment which is available, car parking facilities); and*
- *write to thank the visitor (or get children to do so) after the visit.*

A small brochure has been prepared which can be sent to visitors after initial contact has been made.

Keeping a record

It is advisable for schools to keep a brief record of what takes place in its collective worship programme for a number of reasons. For example, records can:

- in the short term, be a ready source of reference to ensure continuity and variety;
- in the long term, provide a focus for review and development.

In addition, they can:

- be a source of reference should a parent or other person raise a question about practice; and
- provide material to show to and discuss with OFSTED inspectors.

Experience shows that effective records are *simple* and *accessible*. As such, many schools:

- use a printed grid for each week of the term, for example ⁽⁷⁾

Date	Leader	Content/Focus/Message	Song/Hymn Used	Comments

- keep the grids in a ring-binder in the staff room where staff can both complete details of acts of collective worship for which they have been responsible and glance at the structure and content of those led by others.

Addressing the issue of class-based collective worship

Some OFSTED inspection reports have stated that particular schools are not meeting legislative requirements because not all class-based acts of collective worship have been judged to be 'acts of collective worship'.

In considering class-based acts of collective worship, schools are advised to consider to what extent:

- an appropriate atmosphere (conducive to worship, albeit in an educational sense) is being created

Means of doing this might include: using appropriate seating arrangements, subtly marking the transition into and out of the activity (eg by changing the tone and volume of the voice), using a visual focal point, playing music;

- pupils are being given the opportunity to reflect and to think at depth

Means of doing this might include: encouraging response and the asking of questions, using stories which have depth, using silence and quietness, reading out words which invite reflection (poems, prayers etc), encouraging response but not necessarily discussion; and

- pupils and teacher adopt an appropriate bearing towards the activity

This might include: quietening down, being prepared to listen to other people's responses, acknowledging 'deep' questions without necessarily attempting to answer them, accepting both religious and non-religious responses.

Checking the school prospectus

It is statutory requirement ⁽⁶⁾ that a school prospectus includes details of the collective worship provided at the school. These details should, where relevant, indicate whether a determination has been granted (see page 3, note 5). The parental right to withdraw their child from collective worship in whole or in part should also be clearly stated together with provision made for pupils who are so withdrawn.

Preparing for an OFSTED inspection

A school might wish to address and consider the following questions prior to an OFSTED inspection.

1. In what ways is the school seeking to meet legal requirements relating to *frequency* and *character*?
2. What documentation do we aim to make available to the inspectors should they ask to see it?
3. Who will be the best person within the school to meet with the inspector dealing with the section relating to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development? How should this person prepare for the meeting?
4. Are we aware of what OFSTED documentation says about assembly and collective worship?⁽⁹⁾
5. Are we sufficiently clear about the distinction between 'assembly' and 'collective worship'?
6. What acts of collective worship will take place during the week of the inspection?
7. What is our thinking about how collective worship contributes to pupils' spiritual and moral development in particular? What is the evidence for this in practice?
8. To what extent are pupils involved in the assembly life of the school? Should their involvement be greater? Should the involvement of others (staff, visitors etc) be greater?
9. How many pupils (if any) are withdrawn from collective worship by parents? Have we formalised what they should be doing during collective worship time?
10. What are the strengths and weaknesses of current practice? How are we seeking to address weaknesses and to build on strengths?

Notes & References

- (1) Eg 'ATL members have expressed concern that the requirements set down in the Education Reform Act 1988, as interpreted in DFE Circular 1/94, are becoming increasingly unworkable. However, there is also concern that the original legislative intention on collective worship – that is should be genuinely *collective* and *bind together members of a school and help to develop their sense of community* – could be disregarded entirely, to the great impoverishment of schools and their pupils'. *Collective worship: Policy and Practice: Throwing out the baby with the bathwater?* (Association of Teachers and Lecturers, March 1995, 1.5)
- (2) NB DFE Circular 1/94 (January 1994), *Religious Education & Collective Worship*, para 58: 'Collective worship and assembly are distinct activities. Although they may take place as part of the same gathering, the difference between the two should be clear. Collective worship can, nevertheless, be related to the day-to-day life, aspirations and concerns of the school.'
- (3) NB DFE Circular 1/94 (January 1994), *Religious Education & Collective Worship*, para 57: '... worship in schools will necessarily be of a different character from worship amongst a group with beliefs in common. The legislation reflects this difference in referring to 'collective worship' rather than 'corporate worship'.'
- (4) Compare:

'Collective worship should offer pupils opportunities to explore and share beliefs; consider the importance of prayer, meditation and silence; consider the relevance of ideas and beliefs to their own lives; think about the needs of others and develop a sense of community; and appreciate the importance of religious beliefs to those who hold them. Collective worship also offers an opportunity to re-affirm, interpret and put into practice the values of the school. It provides a time to celebrate the various achievements of members of the community that are held to be of worth.'
Spiritual & Moral Development, SCAA Discussion Paper 3 (1996), p8

'Collective worship in schools should aim to provide the opportunity for pupils to worship God, to consider spiritual and moral issues and to explore their own beliefs; to encourage participation and response, whether through active involvement in the presentation of worship or through listening and joining in the worship offered; and to develop community spirit, promote a common ethos and shared values, and reinforce positive attitudes.'
DFE Circular 1/94 (January 1994), *Religious Education & Collective Worship*, para 50
- (5) NB 'The challenge ... consists in creating an experience: which neither imposes nor compromises belief or unbelief but rather recognises the integrity and dignity of all members of the school community; which is essentially educational and stimulates the possibility of reflecting inwardly, sharing outwardly and living upwardly.'
Angela Wood, *Assembly Kit* (BBC/Longman, 1991), p8
- (6) NB 'Our fragmented society needs a whole series of 'reflective pools', places where the very deepest issues of life and death may be explored and understood away from the cut and thrust of the market-place.'
Terry Waite, *Taken on Trust* (Coronet, 1994), p460
- (7) A second example is:

Assembly/Collective Worship Record		Theme.....		Week beginning	
Date	Led by	Content	Method/ means	Focal point Time for reflection	Hymn/song/reading

- (8) See DFES circulars relating to the format and content of the school prospectus
- (9) Schools are advised to familiarise themselves with references to collective worship in the school inspection handbooks published by OFSTED; in particular the passages relating to pupils' personal development (section 3.2) and the curriculum (section 5).