

To: Cynthia Davies (DFES)

From: Tahir Alam - The Muslim Council of Britain

Re: collective worship consultation (letter C. Clarke 12 Feb 2004)

A response to the DfES discussion paper:

**'The way forward for collective worship in the education system'**

- 1.2 This is O.K. Should be kept unchanged. Responsibilities are fairly divided between the L.E.A, governing body and the head teacher.
- 1.3 The requirement for a daily act of collective worship for all registered pupils in maintained schools not to be distinctive of a particular denomination within a faith, is an important one and should be kept. All religions have 'subsets'. This requirement ensures inclusiveness in schools where faith specific collective worship is offered, the removal of this requirement would further complicate matters for schools. The requirement for collective worship in schools to be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character', should continue, as in the main, this country is still regarded as Christian; it is also an undeniable fact that the monarch is the head of the Church of England. The current process of determinations should, also continue. This is a good regulatory measure, without which chaos may ensue within schools.
- 1.4 Although 'worship' is not defined under current educational statutes (1988 ERA, EA 1996 Standards and Framework Act 1998, EA 2002), they do refer to collective worship as 'religious' worship. Thus it is clear that collective worship must be a religious occasion. Therefore, if an act of collective worship consistently avoided reference to a 'Supreme Being' e.g. God, then that would not constitute worship. Those who have faith agree that they must be spiritual elements in the act of collective worship. It is also understood by faith communities that schools are educational institutions. Therefore, the act of collective worship within a school, must have educational worth. It also follows that worship cannot be the same in schools as it would be in a religious institution e.g. a church or mosque. We feel that the

definition of worship perhaps is not a major issue. However, if a clarification is necessary, it is suggested that a definition is outlined herein.

- 1.5 We agree with the spirit of this paragraph.
- 1.6 The time of day when an act of worship takes place and the organization of this activity is flexible, under the ERA Act 1988. Although this offers ease to schools, and should be kept, experience informs that there are greater benefits when the act of worship takes place at the beginning of the day: 'we begin as we mean to go on'.
- 1.7 Noncompliance exists because schools feel that they can get away with disregarding the requirements of the law. OFSTED should have been a lot stronger in their criticisms of noncompliance and make noncompliance a key issue for improvement, instead schools have been encouraged to evade the law simply because OFSTED have deemed the contents of the acts of collective worship to be good. As an example in a recent inspection (Oct. 2003) parents raised the issue with the OFSTED inspector that in spite of their demands, the headteacher has been refusing to make provisions for acts of collective in the school. The OFSTED inspectors' response was 'lots of school are not doing it'. The L.E.A and Local SACREs also have the same laissez- faire attitude towards noncompliance. We are certain that if L.E.A's and SACREs took the lead and OFSTED had a 'no nonsense' attitude, many more schools would be encouraged to find solutions to most of the 'obstacles' facing them. It is fair to say that some large secondary schools cannot get their pupils into one hall at the same time, however, many do divide their pupils into year groups; the current legislation is quite clear in this regard. It is obvious that where there is noncompliance is because schools feel that there is no need to comply! In our experience many schools are not meeting this requirement in the case of Muslim children for 'fear of Islam' and are overtly opposed to any such suggestions.
- 1.8 The suggestion that schools may not be complying because they are unaware of the availability of determination does not hold water.

Birmingham SACRE, in particular, and perhaps others also, have written to the schools in their area outlining the procedure and encouraging applications for determinations. This however, did not result in an increase of applications by schools. Thus it shows a lack of willingness by schools to comply with the law. In our wide experience of getting determinations, for acts of Islamic collective worship, in schools which even have composition of more than 90% Muslim children is no easy task and is opposed and on average takes one to three years of battle to make progress.

2.3(i) The reissuing of the guidance, tailoring it more towards the needs of the schools and teachers may well be helpful. The current process as adopted by Birmingham SACRE is clear and over the years has been simplified on the same basis as the suggestion in this paragraph, we therefore, agree with the spirit of 2.3(i).

2.3(ii) Further guidance to L.E.A's and SACRE's on determinations does not appear to be necessary as in the main they do a good job. What they do not do is to ensure that there is compliance. If the DfES was to state in no uncertain terms that L.E.A's have to ensure that schools in their area complied with the requirements then results may be realized.

2.3(iii) We do believe in inclusion but in this context humanism is not Religion and we are therefore of the view that it is probably not appropriate for them to have representation on committee A.

3.2.1 OFSTED to do some work on collective worship, focusing on what makes a difference: Schools do use the OFSTED criteria for inspection of collective worship, as a guideline. Therefore, it can only be a further help to schools if the proposal outlined in 3.2 be pursued. In the case of minority religions we think it is also important for OFSTED to talk to representative bodies for deeper insight and perspective.

#### 4.1

- **The frequency of collective worship** - it must be daily. This requirement needs to remain in schools, as it is. In our experience the

'room' issue is not necessarily the main reason for non-compliance but for those schools that do not comply because they do not have large enough halls to gather the children at any one time, classroom arrangements can be made and are made in some schools and a speaker system can also be employed to make this more feasible. Reducing the requirement that collective worship takes place daily would also give less opportunity in achieving the aims of developing the pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural education. Collective worship must be recognized as a valuable opportunity to enhance the self-esteem and self worth of pupils as this has many academic benefits. Its status therefore, requires prominence. The requirement for an act of worship in our opinion, would achieve this. Reducing the frequency would, perhaps, make it easier not to comply as its' status would have been reduced.

- **The requirement that it is 'worship'** - (see also 1.4 above). The meaning of worship can be clarified in the updated guidance. It must be a requirement that it has to be worship, as recognized by faith communities, otherwise, what would be the purpose of having an act of worship?
- **The default character of collective worship** - (see also 1.3 above). This situation allows for easy regulation and enforcement. There is a clear requirement: that is to say, that the nature of collective worship in schools should reflect the broad traditions of Christianity; that if this is not appropriate to the family backgrounds of the pupils, then a determination is to be sought so that a school can tailor to act of worship appropriate for its pupils. Thus the status of the schools provision for collective worship is clear. It is easy for outsiders to understand or question the schools compliance or noncompliance. Removing this requirement may only serve to cause confusion.

**Determinations-** the requirements governing the determinations need to be changed to be made consistent with Foundation and Voluntary Aided schools, that is to say that, the decision whether to go for a determination or not, should rest with the governing body after consulting the headteacher and not the other way round as is the case

for community schools at present. In our experience headteachers have been obstructing and refusing to go for determinations even in schools which even have more than 90% Muslim pupils arguing that it is their decision to go for a determination. This needs to be resolved in favour of the governing body which has parent representation and parental views and voices should matter most in such matters.

Many Thanks for this opportunity to contribute to this important initiative and development.

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