

Frequently Asked Questions on the Curriculum and Faith

What do I do if parents ask to withdraw their child from the curriculum because of their religious beliefs?

By being as aware as possible of cultural and religious sensitivities schools should hopefully minimise situations arising where parents make a request to withdraw their child from National Curriculum subjects. Where such a request is made parents should be reminded that the law only entitles parents to withdraw their children from Collective Worship, sex and relationship education and RE. With regard to sex and relationship education, it is important to note that the biological elements in the National Curriculum Science Order are mandatory for all pupils of primary and secondary age across all key stages. It is therefore important for schools to be clear in their Sex and Relationship policy, which elements are delivered outside the National Curriculum Science Order. This policy should be developed in consultation with all parents to ensure that faith and secular perspectives are included.

There is a useful leaflet for parents on the DfES website, which offers support and advice on this situation: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/sreandparents/>

If a student from any faith is withdrawn from a lesson or activity, how can this be conducted sensitively so as to avoid embarrassment or a feeling of isolation?

Embarrassment could be kept to a minimum by early consultation with the student and the parents who should have the responsibility for explaining to the student the reasons for the withdrawal. In the case where the student is withdrawn from the activity but remains physically present, another activity could be provided by the family.

In the case of actual withdrawal (during a sex education lesson, for example) the school will need to consider issues relating to health, safety and supervision.

Care should be taken to treat the student with respect and to avoid drawing undue attention to what is happening.

How should schools ensure that they support the needs of all their students in relation to physical education?

PE is a national curriculum subject that has to be taught to all students in all schools. However schools should adopt a sensitive, flexible approach to this issue. There is some evidence to suggest that participation and enjoyment of sport is enhanced where students feel comfortable about their PE uniform; this is particularly true for girls. Schools should therefore choose a PE uniform, which is practical, comfortable and appropriate to the activity involved. Gender, religious and racial discrimination issues must also be considered.

Where schools do not have changing rooms, they should organise separate changing facilities. There are a number of ways that this can be achieved. They could organise separate space by using curtains or screens to create individual or gender appropriate changing spaces. Alternatively students could change in shifts.

Clothing for PE or swimming needs to be appropriate for the activity while at the same time ensuring modesty and dignity are respected. Schools should have agreed examples of a range of acceptable and unacceptable clothing, explaining the reasons for school policy and practice.

All jewellery should be removed in order to prevent injury to the wearer of the jewellery or other participants. Where difficulties arise in relation to the removal of religious symbols contact should be made with parents/carers to ensure they are aware of the potential

dangers associated with the wearing of such items. Sometimes danger can be reduced if items can be attached to the skin with sweat bands or plasters.

Attention also needs to be paid to options related to changing facilities and showering. Some religions or beliefs do not allow individuals to undress or shower in the company of others. If an organisation requires its staff, for reasons of health and safety, to change their clothing and/or shower, it is good employee relations practice to explore how such needs can be met.

Insistence upon same-sex communal shower and changing facilities could constitute indirect discrimination (or harassment) as it may disadvantage or offend staff or pupils belonging to particular religions or beliefs whose requirement for modesty extend to changing their clothing in the presence of others, even of the same gender. In Islam for example public showering or being naked in front of others is forbidden. Where schools have showers students could shower in their swimming costumes, although the practice of allowing Muslim children to shower in bathing costumes does not solve the problem while other children are naked and in the same communal shower area. Islam forbids undressing in front of others or being among others who are undressed.

If a student went to a teacher, for example his /her Form tutor, with doubts or worries about religion, from where could the school get advice on how to support the student?

All faiths would expect the school to discuss the matter with the student's parents.

How do cater for creationist views in Science lessons?

Many observant members of a range of world religions express concern about how evolution and creationist views of the origins of the world are taught in science lessons. Schools need therefore to ensure that teachers do not imply that religious perspectives are narrow or primitive when introducing this subject.

Supporting the needs of Jehovah's Witness pupils

Jehovah's Witnesses often withdraw their children from RE in school. Why?

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that religious education is the responsibility of the child's home and family. They are aware that parents have an absolute right to withdraw their child from religious education (and collective worship), in whole or in part.

Many Jehovah's Witness families exercise their right to withdraw their children from RE in Key Stages 1 and 2 in order not to confuse their child. Where there is uncertainty about a particular lesson or activity, Jehovah's Witness parents would appreciate discussion with the school in advance: it may be that they are happy for their child to be involved.

What is the Jehovah's Witness attitude towards assembly and collective worship in school?

Jehovah's Witnesses have no objection to their children attending 'assembly' (as an administrative meeting) but would not want them to attend 'collective worship' (as a religious activity). In general, Jehovah's Witness parents would appreciate early discussion with a head teacher or senior teacher about the nature of assembly and collective worship in the particular school.

What is the Jehovah's Witness view on sex education in the school curriculum?

Jehovah's Witness parents would have no objection to those aspects which are included in National Curriculum science. As the law permits, however, they would want to withdraw their children from other aspects of sex education. They consider that sex education is a

matter for the family. They would want the home to deal with issues like contraception (which Witnesses do not object to within marriage, though they do reject abortion).

Would a Jehovah's Witness student's time commitments religious activities ever clash with commitments towards school work and other activities?

A student might be withdrawn from school for one or two days in a year in order to attend a convention as these are regarded as 'days of holy observance'. Jehovah's Witnesses place considerable emphasis on family activity in connection with both worship and recreation. This might limit a student's involvement in extra-curricular activities but would be unlikely to interfere with homework commitments.

Given the Jehovah's Witness attitude towards birthdays, how might a school best respond?

Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate traditional religious festivals such as Christmas and Easter. They believe that there is no scriptural justification for such celebrations which they consider rooted in paganism. For the same reasons, secular occasions such as birthdays and Mother's Day are not celebrated.

Jehovah's Witness parents would therefore not want their children to participate in birthday celebrations. They recognise, however, that incidental reference to birthdays cannot be avoided and would not wish schools to become anxious about this.

In the light of the attitude of Jehovah's Witnesses towards Christmas, Easter and festivals from other world faiths, how would they want their children treated when others at school are involved in activities related to these festivals?

Where lessons and activities are specifically targeted at these festivals, Jehovah's Witness parents would not want their children to participate. However, children could take part if these festivals were being treated in a more 'academic' sense – for example, during an art lesson when a series of paintings (including ones depicting Christmas scenes) was being studied. However parents would not wish their children to take part in a Nativity Play or to make Christmas cards or decorate classrooms or Christmas trees.