

Collective worship

This document provides an overview of schools' statutory responsibilities for collective worship and reflects on the best practice that makes this aspect of each school day so valuable. It has been produced by the Milton Keynes Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE). SACRE has statutory responsibility Religious Education in community schools.

The current legislative framework was originally set out in the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA)*. The main points are:

There must be a daily act of worship for every pupil. This can be at any time of the day in any normal school grouping. It is the Headteacher's responsibility, after consultation with the Governing Body, to ensure this happens. Collective worship is distinct from an assembly, which can be a gathering for a wide variety of reasons.

The majority of worship must be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character; meaning it should reflect the broad traditions of Christian belief. It can contain non-Christian elements.

Worship must be appropriate to the ages, aptitudes and family backgrounds of the pupils. Worship must not be denominational.

The basic requirement is that there should be an act of collective worship for all registered pupils every school day (ERA 6.1). There are only two exceptions to this:

1. Parents have the right to withdraw their children from all, or parts of collective worship
2. Students in school sixth forms are permitted to decide for themselves whether to attend or not.

None of this legislation applies to special schools.

Exceptions

In some schools, for religious reasons, collective worship that '*reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief*' is deemed to be inappropriate for its pupils. In such cases it is possible for a school to apply for a **determination**.

The procedure does not lift the duty to provide daily collective worship; it allows for the requirement that collective worship should be '*wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character*' to be lifted. Applications for determinations are made to the relevant body by the Headteacher after consultation with parents and the school's Governing Body.

Traditionally, it has been a function of the SACRE to receive and determine whether such requests are valid, either granting or refusing them and this still applies in the case of community schools without a religious character. The body now responsible for performing

this function for Free Schools and Academies is the Education Funding Agency (EFA). All determinations last for five years.

* The legal requirement does not apply to voluntary aided and controlled church schools. They have to provide daily worship like all other schools, but they do not come under the remit of the SACRE for collective worship advice. They should seek guidance from their diocese. Obligations in relation to collective worship for academies should be set out in their funding agreements.

What does all this mean in practice?

Good collective worship involves giving particular attention to:

- the importance of atmosphere
- the respect of pupil integrity
- the promotion of spiritual and moral development
- the importance of planning

The legislation allows for a considerable degree of flexibility. The word *collective* implies something significantly different from *corporate*, which was the word used to describe worship in schools prior to 1988. *Corporate* is generally understood to mean worship which is the voluntary response of a corporate body of believers. *Collective* worship is unique and different. It gives us the opportunity to do just that - to collect together, to meet together. It is a collection of differences – different faiths, different cultures, different ages and different backgrounds. It is a focal point of the day in any school community, where all ages can/might meet one another, share together and establish a shared sense of identity.

The invitation to choose to provide worship, which is either wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character opens up opportunities for variety and breadth. This enables the inclusion of secular material and teachings and stories from other religious traditions. Reflecting the broad traditions of Christian belief suggests an approach which is not exclusive, something which reflects plurality and focuses not on doctrine or traditions of worship, but on belief that is broadly Christian.

The expectation is that school worship will be inclusive, participative, challenging and educational, drawing on a wide range of religious traditions without compromising the religious or non-religious backgrounds of pupils (and staff), whilst giving those for whom it is appropriate the opportunity to worship God.

All schools have a duty to promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils. Of the four, the term *spiritual* causes the greatest anxiety as to its meaning. Spiritual is not synonymous with religion. In the context of an educational setting it involves:

- a recognition of the uniqueness of each individual
- helping pupils to develop the capacity to transcend the limitations of the physical world
- helping to lift the horizons of pupils beyond the materialistic

- being creative
- considering ultimate questions about the meaning of life in general and pupils' own lives in particular
- developing positive attitudes and hope

Collective Worship offers a uniquely rich context for all this. It is a place where a sense of that spiritual part of our lives, which needs recognition and expression, can be found.

Creating the place for worship

Creating an appropriate atmosphere in the space to be used for worship is important. This might be in the classroom, with a single class, or a larger space with more children representing a wider diversity. Sometimes when the whole school is assembled, staff use this as an opportunity for things other than worship. Whether in a classroom or a school hall, the transition between other aspects of the day and the act of worship needs to be facilitated. Creative ways need to be found. Symbols and artefacts can work really well to bridge and mark the transition. Candles, music, pictures and many other things can be used to signify the beginning of worship. To light a candle for a specific person or purpose significant to the school community/key stage/year group/class on that day marks a moment of togetherness, readiness to be together in a different way, to worship. For older pupils, known prayer or prose patterns, that are communally said together, can achieve the same.

A menu for worship:

- Prayer is as simple and honest, as liturgical and responsive as you want it to be. The range of resources is enormous, but it is worth remembering that possibly the best resource is the pupils themselves, when they freely write/offer their prayers in their own words.
- Singing/music: there are high quality resources available. Kevin Mayhew is one of the top publishers of resources of music books and CDs. There are new songs written every year that are appropriate for collective worship. It is important never to get trapped into relying on the old ones from yester-year or deciding that all the old songs are part of the past and not relevant to the present day in school worship. *Out of the ark* music and *Redhead Music* are both popular resources with schools – go to their websites for songs for Easter or Harvest or everyday assemblies and music for all occasions. They also publish other songwriters for both KS1 and KS2, offering rich material to facilitate excellent musical worship. Although musicians in the school are of great value in supporting worship, there are obvious benefits to using CDs: they can be used in any room or corner in which you may find yourself whether it be the computer area, classroom carpet corner or the hall with the whole school, and of course they can be available simultaneously for different groups gathered in different parts of the school for worship. Using actions and repetitive action routines, often choreographed by pupils themselves, allows everyone, even those who cannot read the words or speak English, to join in and have fun.

- Story telling: Schools are good at selecting stories from a wide range of sources, including religious texts, to use in collective worship. It is important to remember that stories specifically from religious traditions are used within faith communities not just to teach moral messages, but to communicate something of beliefs about God. When used in inclusive collective worship, their origin should be made clear and that they are sharing the perspective of a particular religious group. That doesn't devalue their use, although pupils do not share the particular religious faith they can still find value in a good story. The Bible, for example, can be a rich resource for collective worship. There are so many different children's or youth versions of the Bible appropriate for use in collective worship for all different ages. The Street Bible by Rob Lacey is an example which brings the Bible alive with prose that conveys the meaning, with an approach that will resonate with pupils who want to be surprised by the Bible. It makes sense and impact rather than using old language and prose which may seem irrelevant to pupils' lives. The Bible offers stories of adventure, journey, poetry or songs of lament, creation, friendship, parables and miracles, fights and famines.
- Art: religious paintings and pictures offer a rich resource for collective worship, particularly with the ease of access through the internet. There is an example of a school which used the painting of *'I stand at the door and knock'* to great effect to get pupils to ponder what it was they would allow into their lives and what it was they would keep out; and to which the door would be kept shut. This was a secondary school act of collective worship and it resonated with so many pupils when they later discussed what it was that they needed to allow in and keep out.
- Visitors provide information on causes and organisations, personal testimony and interview opportunities. They can be an enriching source of ideas. It is wise to brief them carefully and share the school's understanding of collective worship. Some visitors might lead an act of worship; others will be a resource making a contribution to worship which is being led by someone else.
- Stillness/Silence: there are few, if any, moments in which complete stillness can descend on a school community. In collective worship silence and stillness create powerful moments for thinking and listening. 'Drop thy still dews of quietness till all our strivings cease' is a truth to be experienced by the whole school community as they face the usual busy, urgent, rolling programme of learning and achieving. The gift of silence is a gift that can be learnt and practiced in any school's collective worship. It is best learnt when it is not the predictable pattern of every assembly, but skillfully used with symbols such as: light, water or candle flames and a guided intention of how to use the time of stillness.
- Celebrations/Remembrances: collective worship provides opportunities to celebrate the key festivals that are part of the cyclical yearly pattern of worship. Harvest, Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Eid, Diwali, Vaisakhi or Passover – celebrations are all important, and so much of living faith is about celebration and fun. Collective worship must represent the fun, as well as providing stillness and reflection.

- Ritual but not habitual: the best collective worship is where there are repetitive symbols, songs or signs that single out the time of collective worship as a special recognisable time for the school community. Yet, it should never become so repetitive that it becomes predictable and boring. There is a necessary tension between predictability and creativity, between safeness and adventure, during the times that the school sets aside for collective worship each day.
- A number of other activities can legitimately be called worship. Amongst these are:
 - reflection on the meaning of life
 - pondering ultimate questions
 - developing a sense of transcendence
 - responding to a challenge
 - learning from the experience of others

What follows is an example of a possible collective worship policy. It includes a wide range of ideas schools might want to include in such a document. It needs to be personalised and not all the elements included here will be found in all such policy statements.

An Example of a Collective Worship Policy in a LA Maintained School

Schools may use this example as a basis for their policy, if they wish. School policies have to be ratified by the Governing Body every time they are amended. Schools may find that some details which need to be amended more often than a policy is reviewed are better placed in an appendix, which does not need to be approved every time it changes. References are made to an appendix throughout this example policy.

The collective worship policy at (x) School pays due regard to statutory requirements, and has taken account of the guidance offered by the local authority through its SACRE. Collective worship is a valued and valuable part of school life and is taken seriously, because it shapes our approach to others and to what we do in school.

Aims of collective worship

Collective worship in (x) School aims to provide the opportunity for pupils and staff to:

- experience a variety of styles of worship
- celebrate together e.g. festivals, school values, individual achievements
- build a sense of community/foster corporate identity
- develop a reflective approach to living which sometimes encourages understanding of and invitation to prayer
- look beyond the physical, material and measurable
- worship God or reflect on human values
- consider spiritual and moral issues and to explore their own beliefs
- participate and respond, through active involvement in the planning, leading, presentation and evaluation of worship
- feel safe and affirmed in doing any of the above

Statutory requirements

By law, Collective Worship must

- take place for every child not withdrawn by their parents (post 16 students can withdraw themselves) every day
- be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.

This means that our collective worship reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief, without being distinctive of any particular Christian denomination. Not every act of collective worship has to comply with this; just the majority so we are able to be creative and provide a wide variety of experiences.

The Collective Worship Policy of (x) School is consonant with the philosophy and aims of the school, as expressed in the school prospectus.

The Contribution of Collective Worship to aspects of the Curriculum

Collective worship time is distinct from curriculum time given to any subject, including religious education (RE). However, in (x) School, we aim to enable collective worship and aspects of pupils' classroom learning to be mutually supportive.

Collective worship provides opportunities for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development in line with school policy. To achieve this it addresses a wide variety of themes and topics, uses diverse stimuli and resources and provides pupils with opportunities to 'respond' at their own level.

The Management of Collective Worship

The Headteacher is responsible for the provision of collective worship, supported by and after consultation with the Governing Body. The following arrangements exist to co-ordinate, monitor and evaluate collective worship:

1. Headteacher/Deputy Head/delegated teacher draws up a rota for leading collective worship and themes for each week.
2. Headteacher/Deputy Head/delegated teacher observes at least six acts of collective worship, from a range of formats, per term to ensure that they comply with school policy and the law.
3. Teacher, pupil and, where appropriate, parental views are collected annually to evaluate the quality and impact of collective worship and to identify ways in which it might be improved.

(Schools may wish to include a 'role description' for the collective worship coordinator/team in an appendix to their collective worship policy.)

The Organisation of Collective Worship

Collective worship takes place in a variety of groupings in the school hall, or one of the multi-purpose rooms, or the classroom.

Acts of worship usually last for approximately 15 minutes, although it is recognised that this time will be shortened or lengthened when it is appropriate.

(A description of the variety of groupings may also be included here or in an appendix)

Leadership

Every member of the school staff, pupils and occasional visitors, will be involved in leading acts of worship at some point in the school year. *(The appendix might include details such as a weekly leadership pattern)*

Planning Acts of Collective Worship

The content of all acts of collective worship is considered carefully to ensure relevance and suitability for the ages, aptitudes and backgrounds of all pupils.

Termly planning sheets *(could be included in the appendix)* list themes, special occasions and events, but there is flexibility to allow the inclusion of current and topical issues. Weekly planning and recording sheets *(could be included in the appendix)*, enable the monitoring and evaluation of acts of worship.

Visitors are welcomed to lead collective worship from time to time and are given guidance on our worship policy. Leaders from faiths within the area help us to increase the pupils' awareness, promote respect and raise the esteem of the pupils who belong to these faiths.

The Act of Collective Worship

We use a variety of styles, active and interactive methods and a range of resources in our acts of collective worship. Leaders make decisions about these elements according to what is most appropriate to the content, the ages, aptitudes and the backgrounds of the pupils.

Where prayer is included in our acts of worship it is introduced with a form of words that invites but does not coerce pupils to participate. Our prayers are addressed to 'God' rather than Jesus as this is inclusive of the beliefs of our non-Christian religious pupils. We hope that pupils who prefer not to pray will use these moments to reflect on the important messages shared in our worship.

Collective worship should not be confused with assembly. We often take the opportunity of pupils gathered together to share announcements and notices. Using a variety of strategies e.g. music, silence and poems, we indicate clearly to all present when worship begins and ends.

Withdrawal

Our policy sets out clearly our aspiration that collective worship will be a valuable and valued experience for all members of our school community whatever their backgrounds and beliefs. It is invitational and reflective in nature and never coercive or indoctrinatory.

Parents have a right to withdraw their children from all or any acts of worship and staff are also free to withdraw from involvement in this aspect of school life. We request that those who wish to exercise this right inform the Headteacher in writing so that school records are accurate. We also appreciate opportunities to speak with parents and staff who have concerns about collective worship, always keen to develop our understanding of sensitivities

and to overcome difficulties where possible. Those pupils who are withdrawn from worship are cared for by a member of the school's staff.