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Dear Ms Pirrie

Thank you for affording us the opportunity to comment on the consultation paper issued by the Review Group on Religious Observance in Scottish Schools. We have consulted widely within the Scottish Jewish community before responding, but must make clear that this response represents a consensus rather than a unanimous view.

Our response is structured in three sections, addressing respectively Questions 1-3, 4-7, and 8.

1 “Religious Observance”

- Question 1 Do we agree with the definition in the paper?
- Question 2 Do we agree it has the aim of “promoting spiritual development”?
- Question 3 Do we agree it has the aim of “expressing shared values”?

- 1.1 We do not agree with the definition of “religious observance” in the consultation paper, and therefore are unable to respond to Questions 2 and 3.
- 1.2 Religious Observance is an activity which accords with a religious faith. This occurs, for example, when Jewish pupils eat kosher food; when Jewish pupils write ‘BCE’ (Before the Common Era) instead of ‘BC’ (Before Christ) to denote a historical period; when Jewish pupils say specific prayers in Hebrew (the language of Jewish prayer); when Sikh boys wear a turban; when Muslim girls cover their hair with a scarf; when Muslim pupils fast during Ramadan; when Christian pupils sing Christmas and Easter hymns. Each of these examples is specific to a particular faith and would not be practised by any other.
- 1.3 **Non-Denominational Schools**
In addition, we believe that the aim of ‘develop[ing] each individual within the school community as a spiritual being or a whole person’ is an almost impossible task. Adults, and indeed many youngsters, will bring their baggage of life experience to the workplace or classroom and may wish to keep the spiritual side of their lives separate. Individuals who belong to a faith community may derive all their spirituality from their own traditions and practices. Indeed, they may feel alien and uncomfortable when asked to participate in Religious Observance with people of other faiths.
- 1.4 There needs to be a distinction between the general matter of religious observance and the specific matter of school assemblies.
As members of a minority faith, we would not wish to undermine the established churches. We realise that for both committed and nominally Christian pupils the experience of a Christian assembly can be enriching. We

would encourage such assemblies in schools with minority faiths to take place under the following conditions:

- 1) That pupils of other faiths are catered for sensitively and separately; there should be equality of opportunity for all pupils to observe their own faith, particularly where there is a sizeable minority.
- 2) Where there is a sizeable minority, that assemblies for that faith are organised by the faith community (such as arrangements for Jewish pupils at Mearns Castle).
- 3) That such assemblies take place in both secondary and primary schools no more than once per term.
- 4) That assemblies suitable for participation by the whole school also take place at least once a term; reassurance should be given to parents that such assemblies will relate to issues and values that are shared by people of all faiths and none.
- 5) Where there is a response to a world, national or local event, that the whole school can respond together in assemblies of a non-denominational nature.

1.5 It should be part of stated school policy that there will be, say, one Christian assembly on offer a term. For children of other faiths, alternative arrangements should be clearly outlined. Parents should be informed who will take the 'non-denominational assemblies.

1.6 We are aware that there exist in areas of Scotland schools whose pupils are drawn entirely from the Christian faith. We feel that these schools should be allowed to continue to promote a Christian ethos. However, we would hope that they would hold some assemblies that would be devoted to values that are shared by other religions.

1.7 Specific schools

Where a school has been set up to promote a particular ethos, such as the Hebrew language and culture at Calderwood Lodge, the practice of assemblies for Jewish prayer, celebration of Sabbath and festivals should continue. This would apply equally to all denominational schools.

1.8 Access to the Curriculum

In some schools access to some aspects of the curriculum are difficult for some pupils because they are linked to Religious Observance. This can take place in Music, Choirs, Drama and Art. For example, not all pupils will be allowed to take part in Nativity plays, or sing Christmas carols. Christmas and Easter have no place in the Jewish religion.

Non-Christian pupils may well feel excluded or alienated at certain times of the year. We are aware that there can be much tension and embarrassment felt by pupils, especially in the Primary sector. Children do not like to be different.

Some families feel obliged to compromise their beliefs to allow their children to participate along with their classmates.

We would like to see guidelines that will give schools clear direction on how to cater for all pupils at major Christian festivals. Schools should be asked to draw up a policy that allows all pupils to have access to these subjects without a particular religious bias.

2.1 **Question 4** Frequency

We are content with the present frequency of weekly such activities in primary and monthly in secondary schools.

2.2 **Question 5** Location

Religious observances should not be held in designated places of worship unless they are intended only for members of that faith. As noted above assemblies or events such as prize-givings which are held in places of worship can be extremely alienating for those who are not members of that faith, and this should be avoided.

However, since these are intended as activities for the school community, they should where possible be held within the school. A community centre is therefore only second best.

2.3 **Question 6** Are we aware of the right to withdraw children?

Yes; and members of the Jewish Community have traditionally exercised this right with regard to both religious education and religious observance. However, we believe that other minority communities may be unaware of this right, and we would favour guidance being given to schools to ensure that parents are aware of it.

2.4 **Question 7** opportunities

As stated above, we believe that religious observance has a place within the school. That required both space and time within the school and within the school timetable. The alternative is for practice to negate policy.

We believe that a suitable model already exists for such activities in the form of the “Time for Reflection” in the Scottish Parliament, or for that matter “Thought for the Day” on number of radio stations. These are intended as thoughtful, indeed ‘prayerful’ reflections on some aspect of contemporary society, or topical event, but are not themselves acts of worship.

Nonetheless, they are led by someone whose reflection is shared with the listeners, rather than listeners being left to ‘meditate’ in isolation. We believe that to be even more appropriate in an educational context, and would regard a school chaplain, representatives of other faiths, members of the school community, or representatives of non-political community groups all to be suitable people for this role.

Question 8 How helpful was the exemplar?

3 We did not find the exemplar helpful.

We have no objection to its content. Stories from many different traditions might provide suitable content for a shared reflection. However, we regard the suggestion that pupils be asked to reflect individually as both unrealistic in terms of classroom discipline and inconsistent with the aim of a shared experience.

We would therefore recommend the model of the parliamentary “Time for Reflection”. A story – perhaps that in the exemplar – is made the subject of an ethical reflection by the speaker. A moral is drawn by the speaker. In the classroom, perhaps discussion can follow. Spiritual values can be emphasised, and a collective purpose can be served.

There is an analogy with sport. The exemplar substitutes criticism for exercise. While recognising the need for sensitivity to individual needs and diversity, this throws out the baby with the bathwater. New guidance is needed, but it should retain its essential function.