

PE1262: Evidence from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities welcomes this opportunity to provide evidence in relation to PE1262. It should, however, be noted, that there is no Jewish school in Scotland, although Calderwood Lodge Primary in East Renfrewshire is designated a "multi-denominational school with a Jewish ethos".

Issues raised in this petition

We are at something of a loss in relation to the call to "make all schools teach non-denominational subjects", since all schools teach, for example, Mathematics, English, Modern Languages, History, etc, none of which are in the least "denominational". Perhaps the intention of the petitioner is that only these subjects should be taught, and that religious education should be removed from the curriculum, but we would contend that it is important for pupils to learn both about the beliefs of their own family and community, and of others, and that this tends to promote good community relations, rather than to pressurise pupils to adopt any particular outlook.

We agree with the petitioner about the importance of the European Convention of Human Rights, and in this context would particularly highlight Protocol 1, Article 2 which states:

"In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religions and philosophical convictions."

While we regret that the petitioner does not feel that her school listens to pupils' views, we note that she has not been able to provide an illustration relating to religion, but only to the provision of playground seating. We also regret that the petitioner feels she "[doesn't] have the best relationship with [her] school" but note that her school and parents, have provided her with the necessary skills to demonstrate "independence of choice, conscious [*sic*] and religion", and, moreover, to have become aware of and to make use of the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions process. We disagree with some of the views expressed by the petitioner, but, nonetheless, commend her ability to express those views effectively in a public forum.

Specific issues raised during the discussion on the petition:

How many faith based schools teach only about their particular faith?

We are strongly supportive of the view that pupils should learn about faiths other than their own, and agree with the petitioner's desire that pupils to have "a vaster knowledge of many more religions". However, we believe that such teaching is the norm, and, in our experience of interfaith activity, we are not aware of any faith schools in Scotland that do not teach pupils about religions other than that to which the school is affiliated.

Children of all faiths and of none attend Calderwood Lodge Primary, and the school's Improvement Plan¹ includes a commitment to continued development of both the

¹ <http://www.ea.e-renfrew.sch.uk/calderwoodlodge/Documents/Improvement%20Plan%202009-10.pdf>

Jewish studies and Other World Religion curricula in line with the new Curriculum for Excellence Outcomes and Experiences. The Jewish studies curriculum is Religious Education, not Religious Instruction – that is, it does not inculcate doctrine, but includes heritage, culture, health and wellbeing, and actively makes links to shared values with other world religions.

Are there mechanisms in schools to detect whether some children may feel stressed under the pressure of a school to be part of a religion?

No child attending a state school is compelled to attend religious assemblies or religious education classes since parents have the right to withdraw their children from these activities.

Good practice ensures that staff are aware of pupil concerns, whether about engaging in religious worship or education or any other aspect of school life, and that they respond appropriately.

The school provides a variety of ways for individual pupils and their parents to make their views known on any subject, including the school's Jewish ethos. These include both Pupil, and Parent Councils, a Suggestions Box, drop-in, and "meet the teachers" evenings, and, most importantly, an open door policy for pupils and parents to speak with the head teacher.

Calderwood Lodge Primary fully subscribes to the East Renfrewshire Local Authority *Guidance for Schools on Procedures for Complaints Involving Pupils*² which provides not only for a pupil to submit a formal complaint, but for pupils to submit third party complaints. Possible subjects for complaint include, amongst other things:

- an aspect of school life
- a school policy or its application
- the delivery of school services
- the behaviour of an individual(s) or an organisation.

and the guidance also stipulates that pupils must be provided with support to access and utilise the complaints system. This is, therefore, a route by which any pupil who felt under pressure to participate in faith-based activity could make his or her views known and have them addressed.

What are the safeguards to ensure that faith based schools do not oppose or diminish other faiths?

It should, of course, be recognised that the beliefs of different religions are often fundamentally at variance with one another. This is not, however, a reason, nor even an excuse, for the adherents of any faith to denigrate the beliefs or adherents of any other. On the contrary, genuine interfaith dialogue can only take place once difference has been acknowledged. This applies in schools, no less than in inter-faith associations.

All pupils attend Calderwood Lodge Primary by means of a placing request – the school does not have a catchment area. As a result, parents, whether Jewish or of other faiths or none, actively choose the school for their child after having received detailed information about its Jewish ethos.

² <http://www.ea.e-renfrew.sch.uk/kirkhill/Child%20Protection/Complaints%20Involving%20Pupils.doc>

The mutual respect demonstrated between Jewish staff and the head teacher, who is not Jewish, provides a daily model for pupils, which is reinforced by the curriculum, and also the standard of behaviour expected of pupils. The school endeavours to be fully inclusive and take cognisance of all sensitivities.

Relevant action the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is taking to address these (the Committee is interested in specifics e.g. what is the action, how is it relevant, why is it being taken, when).

Responsibility for developing, directing, or implementing policy in Calderwood Lodge Primary rests with the head teacher, staff, and local authority, not with the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities. Calderwood Jewish Education³ also plays an important role, since it, and not the Local Authority, finances the Jewish studies curriculum, and employs Jewish studies staff, who are, however, under the management of the head teacher.

The school has a strong Personal and Social Development programme, which "promotes self-awareness, self-esteem and positive relationships between pupils". This is not confined to the upper school – the school *Standards and Quality Report*⁴ includes a commitment to develop "creative, imaginative play opportunities to allow the children to generate their own ideas, problem solve, and make decisions". This active encouragement to pupils to think independently, and develop self-confidence, is the reverse of the petitioner's fear that pupils in faith-based schools may feel "discouraged from making their own independent decisions". On the contrary, pupils in schools with a strong religious ethos, such as Calderwood Lodge Primary, are supported to develop, in the words of the petitioner, "important life skill[s]" of respect for others, self-esteem, and confidence to question and to "follow their own beliefs and thoughts".

Note: The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland comprising Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Dundee as well as the more loosely linked groups of the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands, and of students studying in Scottish Universities and Colleges. SCoJeC is Scottish Charity SC029438, and its aims are to advance public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture and community. It works with others to promote good relations and understanding among community groups and to promote equality, and represents the Jewish community in Scotland to government and other statutory and official bodies on matters affecting the Jewish community.

In preparing this response we have consulted widely among members of the Scottish Jewish community, particularly among those involved in education.

³ <http://www.oscr.org.uk/CharityIndexDetails.aspx?id=SC012937>

⁴ <http://www.ea.e-renfrew.sch.uk/calderwoodlodge/Documents/Standard%20&%20Quality%20Report.pdf>