

South Gloucestershire SACRE Guidance on Assemblies in Schools 2025

Time to Reflect

Time to Reflect represents guidance offered for community schools and academies without a religious character in South Gloucestershire. It aims to support schools in developing a coherent policy to ensure that pupils have effective and reflective experiences in assemblies or collective worship. It offers an explanation of the legal obligations, including the right to withdrawal, and explains the rich opportunities that assemblies offer pupils and students for their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Schools with a religious character are covered by different legal requirements, so are able to access specific guidance on collective worship based on their own faith-based criteria.

1. Why have Assemblies?

‘Collective worship’ is a requirement of the [Education Act 1996](#). South Gloucestershire SACRE defines this as a **time to celebrate beliefs and values that have a ‘collective worth’**. In many community schools the term ‘assembly’ is commonly used to describe this activity, and this is the term we use in our guidance. At their best, assemblies can achieve a great deal. They can be a daily collective activity which can recognise and emphasise common values, aspirations and commitments. Each school needs to think about what is beneficial for the whole school community in the light of the diverse faith and worldview traditions and backgrounds of its children and adults.

Here are some reasons why inclusive assemblies are beneficial in schools.

School assemblies:

- Give time to pause, offering space and stillness before, during or at the end of a busy day to be oneself, to reflect or just to sit at rest
- Help to foster a spirit of community in a school, year group or class
- Can enable the joys and sorrows of those present, those local to the school, and the joys and sorrows of national and international news, to be reflected upon and shared in a way which is otherwise not possible in school
- Can enable the overall personality and ethos of the school to come across to everyone
- Offer an opportunity to share and reinforce the vision and values the school seeks to live by
- Can enable individuals and groups of staff and pupils to share their concerns, interests and reflections
- Can help pupils contemplate the many ultimate questions life presents and know that others of all ages ponder these too
- Can be a time of sharing those things that unite, whilst acknowledging or celebrating the diversity of beliefs and values within and beyond school
- May provide an opportunity for pupils (and staff) to connect with their own personal faith, beliefs, values or spirituality and to reflect on the most important directions and values for their lives

- May provide a time which pupils can make their own
- Are one of the few occasions in a week of schooling that can offer space for the spirit

There is no National Curriculum for assemblies or collective worship. The content is at the school's discretion.

2. The Legal Requirement for Assemblies (Collective Worship)

1. All maintained schools and academies, whether or not they have a religious character, are required to have daily acts of collective worship and to teach Religious Education as part of their curriculum. Schools with a religious character provide denominational collective worship in line with their foundation and are not subject to the requirement to provide 'wholly or mainly broadly Christian' acts of collective worship.
2. An act of 'Collective Worship' is required to be provided for all registered school pupils (5 - 18) on each school day (unless withdrawn – see below). Pupils in special schools should take part in an act of assembly as far as it is practicable.
3. Assemblies may be held at any time during the school day.
4. Separate assemblies may be arranged for different age or school groupings.
5. Assemblies must take place on school premises.
6. In any one term in a community or a non-religious foundation school or academy, assemblies should be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'. That is, most (or all) of the acts of worship must reflect the broad traditions of Christian belief without being distinctive of any one Christian denomination. (See detailed section below)
7. Assemblies must be appropriate, being mindful of wider diversity and having regard to the family backgrounds, ages and aptitudes of the pupils.
8. Where an assembly which is wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character is inappropriate, the Headteacher and governors may apply to the local SACRE (and in the case of Academies will need to refer to the terms of their funding agreement), for permission to arrange worship for all or some of the pupils which is not wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character (see Determinations).
9. Parents have the right to withdraw their children from assemblies (see below).
10. Teachers cannot be compelled to lead or participate in an assembly, but it is the responsibility of the Headteacher and Governing Body to ensure that it takes place.

Every school under Local Authority control must have a policy for assemblies that is drawn up in accordance with the law, and reflects as far as possible the consensus of views of the various stakeholders i.e. staff, governors and the community.

All academies, in accordance with their funding agreements, should have a daily act of collective worship and may be inspected under Ofsted criteria which may make judgements about SMSC.

Within the legal framework the responsibility for arranging assemblies rests with the Headteacher, after consultation with the Governing Body in community schools.

[DFE Circular 1/94](#) is not legislation but offers guidance. See 'What is Collective Worship?'

How should schools introduce school assemblies?

The South Gloucestershire Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) would expect teachers of any religious or philosophical persuasion to be able to participate in and lead acts of school assembly.

Schools without a religious character are secular spaces where no one religious or non-religious worldview takes precedence over another. In this context, the school acts as a forum where expressions of religious and non-religious beliefs, together with dialogue and discussions about and between different faiths and worldviews, can take place. South Gloucestershire SACRE believes this should be encouraged – that a healthy school community includes open and humane exchanges of and about different faiths and worldviews.

We favour a broad and inclusive approach to school assembly which allows children to reflect upon their shared human experience and feelings of joy and sadness, thankfulness and need, their reflections on shared values and concerns and the exploration of (what some refer to as) the spiritual area of experience.

As with all areas of the curriculum, school assembly should be a valid educational experience. There is also the need for respect, understanding, compassion, attentiveness and empathy in relation to the different beliefs of teachers, parents and children. Assembly can only be inclusive if it is defined broadly enough to include those who have no belief in divine beings or powers.

Unpacking what is meant by ‘Wholly or Mainly of a Broadly Christian Character’

The Act states that the collective worship organised by the school is to be ‘wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character’. We note that this means that most school assemblies will reflect an open-minded understanding of Christian beliefs, in their broadest sense. The law does not require schools to embrace any specific Christian worship practices. Schools will probably want to focus on values that many religious and non-religious worldviews have in common.

Examples of beliefs and values to be given focus:

- an awareness of the innate value of creation, nature or life, and our human responsibility to care for it
- the uniqueness and dignity of all human beings and the opposition to prejudice, injustice, cruelty, violence
- The importance of understanding the needs of others (particularly minorities), expressing gratitude, and practising forgiveness

These beliefs and values, while being precious to Christians and other major religious traditions of the world, are in harmony with the broad spiritual and moral concerns that are shared across all human societies.

In selecting broadly Christian material or any other resources, it is important that schools ensure that acts of worship are ‘inclusive’. It must be remembered that it is not the role of the school to nurture religious faith. Assemblies that raise the beliefs and values suggested provide opportunities for ‘broadly Christian collective worship’ as well as stimulating all young people to reflect, to feel awe, to learn to be still and to consider the direction and meaning of their lives.

Content and Presentation

South Gloucestershire SACRE’s approach should help schools to facilitate a version of school assembly that eases and promotes a polite and vigorous expression of religious and non-

religious worldviews, and a dialogue between them. It should emphasise a community ethos that celebrates all that is shared.

The unifying element for each act of school assembly will be a central theme focusing the attention of all taking part on a single idea. School or local events, a topic explored by one class, the lives and experiences of people past and present, current religious festivals, national and international days, and the school's agreed shared values are examples of suitable themes for assemblies.

The methods used to present particular themes may include:

- Spoken word: story, poetry, interviews, discussion, readings from religious and secular literature
- Music and singing – hymns, popular songs, chants or singing games (care should be taken when choosing religious songs. They should not include words that imply that pupils hold specific religious beliefs or are part of specific religious communities)
- Visual stimuli: pictures, posters, artefacts, natural objects, religious objects, personal objects, works of art, or film clips
- Performance: dance, music, mime, drama, role play, or puppets
- Music: either performed or played
- Preparing and sharing food
- Silence: stilling, reflection, contemplation, meditation and, if appropriate, prayer.

In today's plural society a creative silence may well be considered to be more inclusive than vocalised prayer. All opportunities for prayer need to be optional, using framing language that allows pupils to dwell on their own thoughts if they choose.

If done well, such acts of school assembly could encourage a less frenetic, more peaceful ethos in a school.

Opting Out: the Right to Withdraw

We anticipate that our inclusive guidance will be broadly accepted by the whole school community. Many parents see the provision of assemblies by a school as part of its expression of care for the well-being of its pupils.

However, there remains the legal right for a parent to withdraw their child(ren) from assembly. If there is such a request, it is recommended that the school's policy on assembly is shared with the parent, and that their concerns are aired. A constructive discussion with the parent can often resolve any negative understandings. However, this cannot be enforced, as a parent retains a legal right to withdraw their child without having to justify their decision to the school.

Pupils aged 16 or over are able to withdraw themselves from assemblies in schools.

In this case the school can offer three alternatives:

- Pupils can simply not attend assembly and spend their time off the school premises with their parents or be under the supervision of a member of staff elsewhere in the school;
- Parents and Headteacher together can agree to make informal parallel provision for those of a different faith, provided that this does not become the school's main act of assembly, and no additional costs fall on the school or the LEA;
- The Headteacher can apply to SACRE for a 'Determination' to build worship around a faith other than Christianity. This only applies to alternative religious faiths; a

Determination cannot be requested for non-religious 'Collective Worship' as there is no legal mechanism for this.

For further information please contact

Chair of SACRE

Mike Riches

SACRE Adviser

Ed Pawson

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