**RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE IN SCHOOLS IN SCOTLAND**

**THE ISSUE:** In terms of the *Education (Scotland) Act 1980*, state-funded schools in Scotland must provide for the practice of religious observance. At least six times per year, both denominational (religious) and non-denominational schools must have the opportunity for ‘community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school’s community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school and community’. In a denominational school, RO would primarily take the form of religious worship, such as attending Mass. In a non-denominational school, RO should take account of children of all faiths and none. In practice, it tends to take the form of Christian celebration, such as singing hymns.

**THE CONCERNS:** It is not clear whether religious observance can be practised in a way that reflects the increasing diversity of faith and no-faith communities in Scotland. Statistical data relating to religious affiliation and practice indicate that Scotland is a country with a high and growing number of persons who do not affiliate with Christianity. More than 46% of the Scottish population do not affiliate with a Christian religion; 36% of the population ticked the ‘no religion’ box in the 2011 census.

Existing research points to concerns regarding the current duty as it applies in non-denominational schools.

1. The appropriateness of the term ‘religious observance’ to describe acts designed to include children of all faiths and none.
2. The arguably contradictory nature of the policy guidance: is it possible to practise RO in a way that can include all students when beliefs are not shared within the school community?
3. Lack of understanding amongst teachers as to the appropriate implementation of the RO requirement under current policy guidance, with no clear good practice model to follow outside of traditional Christian worship.
4. Lack of understanding amongst pupils as to purpose of RO as part of the curriculum.
5. Non-faith pupils and families may feel excluded from the school community whilst the focus remains on conducting personal search through religion.
6. The place of the child's right to withdraw from RO.
7. Procedures surrounding the conduct of RO may fall foul of relevant human rights standards as protected under the *Standards in Scotland’s School etc Act 2000* and the *Human Rights Act 1998*, including the right to freedom from discrimination, the right to freedom of religion or belief and the right to education.

**THE OPPORTUNITITES:**  Scottish parents agree that the opportunity for religious or moral reflection should form part of school life. The current legislation gives schools considerable latitude as to how the requirement of RO should be implemented, and religious and secular organisations have shown willingness to collaborate in determining how RO might be most effectively and inclusively delivered. Scotland has the opportunity to lead the world in developing a twenty-first century practice of ethical reflection in schools. In moving forward, the following questions require reflection and investigation:

1. Should the existing legislation and policy guidance remain in their current form?
2. Should the practice of RO become voluntary?
3. Could a good practice model of non-religious reflection for schools be developed?
4. How could such a good practice model be implemented in Scotland?