**COLLECTIVE WORSHIP IN SCHOOLS IN WALES**

**THE ISSUE:** The *School Standards and Framework Act 1998* places an explicit duty on state-funded schools in Wales to organise daily acts of collective worship. For schools which have a ‘designated’ religious character, often referred to as ‘faith’ schools, the acts of worship must be in accordance the religious character of the schools. For all other schools, the majority of these acts of worship during any school term must be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character’ and must be concerned with ‘reverence or veneration paid to a divine being or power’. The imposition of this duty was fiercely opposed by certain Welsh MPs at the time of its introduction in the 1940s, when it was argued that the requirement represented a ‘revolution in British educational history’ through the sanctioning of state compulsion in religious matters in schools.

**THE CONCERNS:**  In a country with no established religion, a strong non-conformist tradition and an unhappy history of State interference in education, a statutory obligation on state schools to provide a daily act of religious worship may appear anomalous. Statistical data relating to religious affiliation and practice indicate that Wales is a country with a high and growing number of persons who do not affiliate with Christianity. More than 42% of the Welsh population do not affiliate with a Christian religion; 32% of the population ticked the ‘no religion’ box in the 2011 census and Wales has the lowest rate of church attendance in the UK.

Existing research points to concerns regarding the current duty as it applies in schools without a designated religious character. These concerns include:

1. The appropriateness of the aims of the duty in state schools in a multi-belief society, eg to provide an opportunity to worship God.
2. The contradictory nature of the aims in the context of a diverse student population, eg to provide an opportunity to worship God yet simultaneously to develop a community spirit and promote a common ethos.
3. The lack of clarity in the legal provisions: what does ‘worship’ mean in a school context?
4. The controversial content and confused status of the statutory guidance (Circular 10/94). Estyn has implied that this guidance forms part of the ‘legal requirements for collective worship in schools in Wales’.
5. Some schools refuse to implement the statutory duty on principle, believing it to be an inappropriate obligation to place on state funded schools.
6. Non-Christian pupils and families feel excluded from the school community, thus negating any expectation of building community school spirit through acts of collective worship.
7. The activity in its current form represents a missed opportunity to foster shared values.
8. Procedures surrounding the conduct of collective worship may fall foul of relevant human rights standards as protected under the *Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011* 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:**  The current law dates from a time when Welsh views and principles were easily subsumed by its dominant partner in the Westminster legislature. Today, Welsh institutions have the legal competence to grasp the issue of collective school worship and to respond to its complexities in an innovative manner appropriate for Welsh society in the twenty-first century. In moving forward, the following questions require reflection and investigation:

1. Should the existing duty and statutory guidance remain in their current form?
2. Should the existing duty be made voluntary?
3. Should the existing duty be removed with no replacement provided?
4. Should the existing duty be removed and replaced with an alternative activity with fresh aims?