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A Survey into Parental Knowledge and Attitudes towards RME and Observance in Scottish Schools

Scottish schools have a statutory obligation to make parents and their children aware of their right to withdraw from aspects of religious and moral teaching and observance schools. In addition the attitudes of parents to matters of religion and belief in Schools can often be taken for granted.

An independent study into both of these issues was required to see if these obligations to children and parents are being met.

At the beginning of April 2012, The Humanist Society Scotland commissioned YouGov to survey 1000 Scottish parents of children aged 5 to 16 to find out if they were aware of their rights, where they had heard about their rights and to investigate their attitudes towards covering belief in Scottish schools.

The research was sponsored by the Humanist Society of Scotland and prepared in collaboration with YouGov to ensure the responses are a fair representation of the views held by Scottish Parents.

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Introduction

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. The sample was 1000 Scottish parents with children aged between 5 and 16.

Fieldwork was undertaken between the 29th March and 4th April 2012. The survey was carried out online as a bespoke piece of work by YouGov.

The sample included 510 men and 490 females. Please note all figures are rounded to the nearest 1%.

Question 1: Parental understanding of the right to withdraw?

According to the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 every parent has the right to withdraw their child from any aspect of Religious Observance (RO) or Religious and Moral Education (RME). The schools have a statutory obligation to make parents aware of this right.

Parents were asked:

Before today, were you aware that you legally have the right to withdraw your child from taking part in any RO and/ or RME at any school?

- **39% of parents were not aware** that they have the right to withdraw children from RO & RME.
- Only 20% of parents were originally made aware of their right to withdraw by their school.
- 41% found out about their right to withdraw through their own research, friends or another route that was not through school.

Four out five parents (80%) were either ignorant of their rights or originally found out through a source other than school. This shows that the education system and schools are not doing enough to promote the right to withdraw to parents.

Worryingly, 39%, over **a third of parents were not aware of their right at all**.

Overall, it appears, schools are not doing a good enough job to ensure a significant proportion of parents know about their statutory rights and to offer guidance on making an informed choice about RME in schools.

Question 2: How often do you think your child takes part in RO or RME

In the last review of RO in Schools the Scottish Government (then the Scottish Executive) concluded that every school should provide opportunities for RO at least six times in a school year, in addition to traditional celebrations..., and preferably

with greater frequency. RME is part of the curriculum and classes are timetabled throughout the term.

Parents were asked:

Approximately, how often, if at all, does your child study or take part in RME and/ or RO at school?

- **5% of parents say that their child never studies or takes part in RMO or RE.**

One in twenty parents says that their child doesn't take part in RMO and RE, a significant number of children in Scotland. We did not ask individuals about the quality of this time spent away from other pupils and this remains an open question.

- **18% of parents did not know how often their child takes part in RMO or RE.**
- **11% of parents thought RMO and RE took place on a monthly or less-frequent basis.**

While each school is free to provide its own programme and timetable of RO and RME it is clear that RMO or RE occurs more often than once a month.

Schools in general are failing to make a significant proportion of parents (18%) aware of the frequency of RO and RME in Schools.

Question 3: What are the main reasons for keeping Children in RME and RO

Parents who didn't remove their child from RMO/RE were asked about the reasons they chose to keep their children in RMO/RE

They were asked:

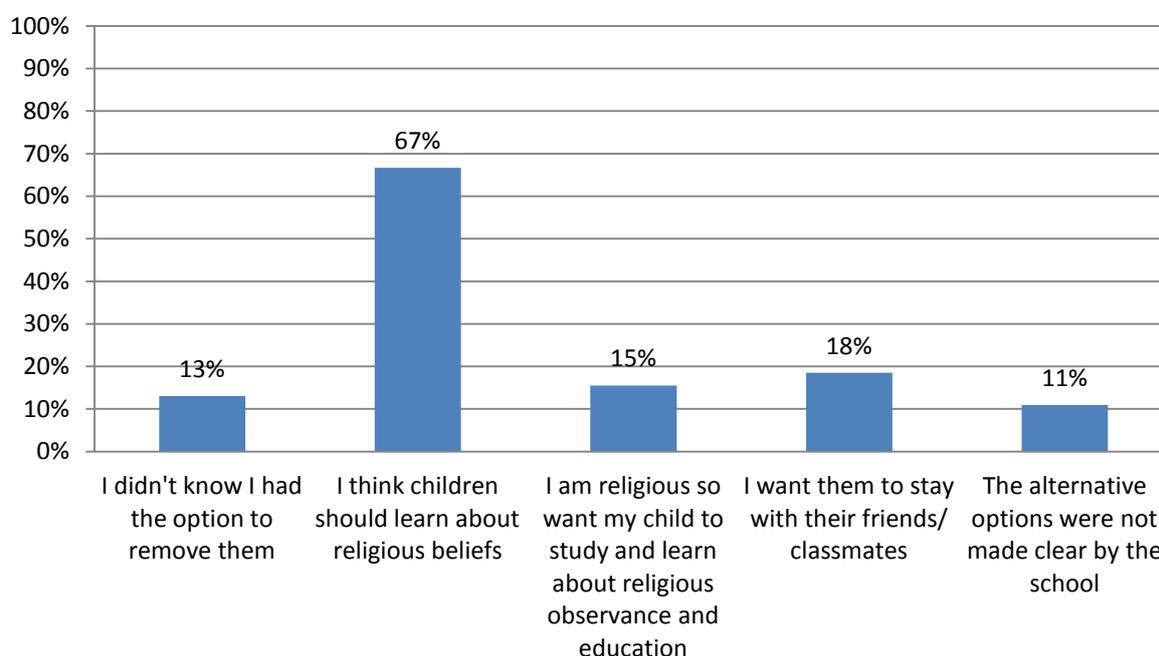
Which, if any, of the following are reasons why your child takes part in RO and/ or RME at school?

- **Only 15% gave their own religion as a reason** they wanted children to learn their own belief in Schools.
- **67% of parents felt that children should learn about a variety of religious beliefs.**

The results show parents want their children to learn about belief but not necessarily because of their own faith.

- 18% wanted their children to remain with friends and classmates.
- 11% of parents said the option to remove them was not clear and 13% said the alternatives had not been explained.

Reasons given for child taking part in RO & RME?



All 768 Scottish parents of children aged 5-16 whose child studies or takes part in religious observance and/ or religious and moral education at any school

Religious belief is not a primary reason for parents wanting their children to take part in religious teaching and observance. Parents are open to children learning about belief but this is more about a broad idea of RE and RMO than about belonging to one faith.

Question 4: What do parents think is the best way of approaching RME in schools

Denominational and non-denominational schools in Scotland are asked to cover a variety of faith and belief positions in RME and RO but the extent to which each area should be covered is not set down in any guidelines.

Parents were asked:

When asked Which ONE of the following do you think is the BEST approach for teaching RO and RME in Scottish schools?

- 18% or **nearly one in five parents think RO and RME should be removed from schools.**

- **Most parents, 71%, support plurality** in RO and RME. 39% felt schools should spend equal time on all main religions while 32% felt all main religions should be covered with an emphasis on religion held by the majority of pupils
- **Only 4% felt a school should focus on one religion**

Nearly three quarters (71%) are interested in having their children hear from a wide variety of positions on religion and moral education. This again supports the idea that it not religious belief but knowledge and understanding of many ways of thinking that the majority of parents want their children to gain from education.

Question 5: What areas do you think RME and RO in schools should cover?

The idea of RME and RO can cover a wide variety of topics and areas. Usually this is seen through a religious celebrant speaking in schools or conducting services and through the information provided as part of the curriculum but should also include non-religious systems of belief.

Parents were asked:

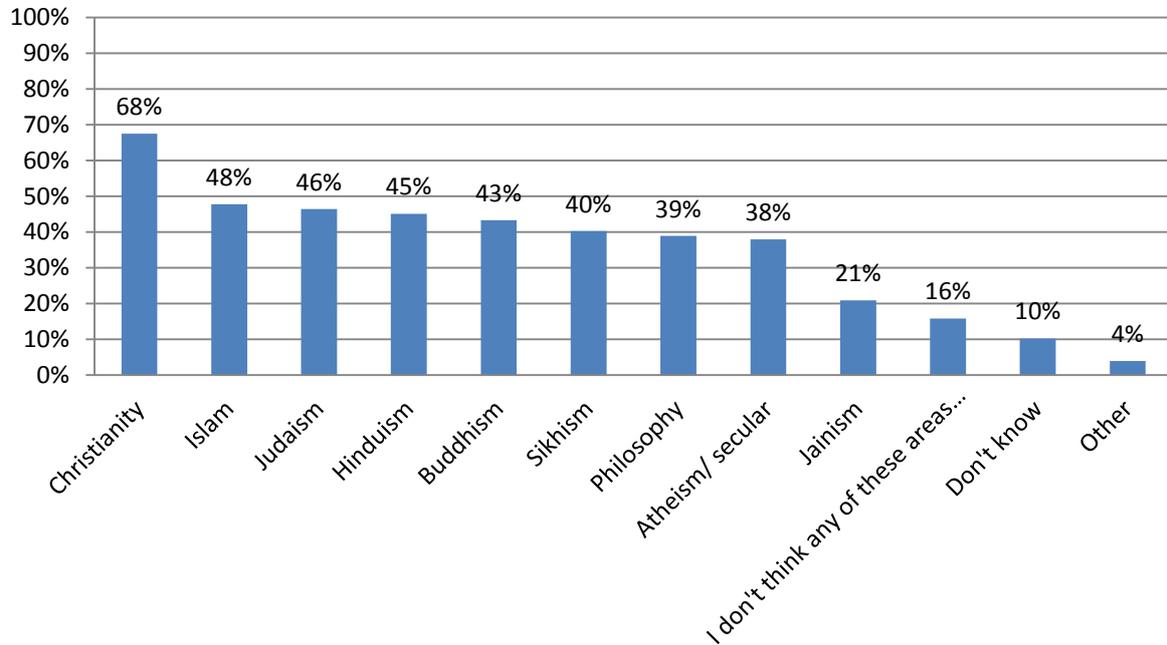
Still thinking about RO and RME in Scottish schools...Which, if any, of the following areas do you believe should be covered by your child's school?

- 68% of parents thought Christianity should be covered in schools.
- 16% of parents thought that no religious or spiritual areas should be covered in schools.
- Most other areas and viewpoints scored higher than the average score of 35%.

Unsurprisingly, due to its history and traditions, Christianity was the only option requested by the majority of parents. There was **a significant support for most other viewpoints**, including non-religious choices.

Again the wide variety of responses collected shows an appetite for choice in the topics covered in RME and RO in schools.

Which, if any, of the following areas do you believe should be covered by your child's school?



Conclusion

Overall the research above demonstrates that:

- Parents are not being adequately aware of their right to withdraw.
- The frequency and style of (RME) RME and RO (observance) in schools is not being communicated to a significant proportion of parents.
- Religious belief is not a major factor for most parents who wish that their children take part in RME and RO in schools.
- Parents want to see a wide variety of viewpoints regarding religions and non-belief systems covered in schools. A significant number would like religion to be removed from schools.
- Parents wanted to see secular and (non-secular) religious viewpoints, especially Christianity, covered in schools.