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Please ask for: Julie Roberts, Clerk to SACRE

FAO Headteacher/ Chair of Governors

To: All Schools (including academies)

Dear Colleagues

PARENTAL CONCERNS ABOUT RE VISITS

Members of Staffordshire's SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education) have received reports that some schools are encountering objections and negativity from parents when they are planning trips to places of worship, or trips which include visits to places with religious significance.

SACRE has produced a guidance document, copy attached, which it is hoped will be helpful to schools in pre-empting parental objections. It includes a suggested Letter to Parents, which schools are free to use or adapt as necessary.

We very much hope that you will find the document useful, and would be very grateful if you could circulate it widely amongst any of your staff, to be considered in their planning for visits and trips.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Emma".

Emma Jardine-Phillips

Adviser to Staffordshire SACRE

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael R. Metcalf".

Rev. Preb. Michael Metcalf

Chair of Staffordshire SACRE

Staffordshire SACRE Guidance on Parental Concerns about RE Visits

The Staffordshire Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education affirms that the role of RE is to foster in each pupil a growing level of religious literacy, through three complementary aims, encapsulated as Exploring, Engaging, Reflecting. The first two of these correspond to “Learning about” and “Learning from” religion. The third aim calls for pupils to “acquire a growing range of the social, spiritual and emotional skills and dispositions appropriate to living well in a religiously plural and open society, by reflecting on the reality of religious diversity and on the issues raised by living in a diverse world”. Visits to sacred spaces bring the Agreed Syllabus to life and underpin the role of RE in helping to prepare and equip pupils for life and citizenship in today’s diverse and plural Britain.

Sacred spaces in RE can range from a reflective moment in a place of worship to creating a sacred room or garden in the school grounds. Visiting sacred spaces allows pupils to engage with living religions and meet members of faith communities to learn about their beliefs, rituals and celebrations. These multi-sensory experiences have the potential to improve pupil engagement and motivation.

Some schools have experienced a reluctance from a few parents to allow their children to take part in visits to places of worship. Reasons given have included finance, safety issues or a political agenda. The legal right for parents to withdraw children from RE adds an additional factor. This document aims to support head teachers and RE subject leaders in the planning and implementation of visits, trying to pre-empt any parental concerns.

Because visits to sacred spaces are an invaluable learning opportunity, it is important to ensure the experience is positive for all involved. Visits to places of worship require careful planning and consideration of teaching methodology in order to maximise the learning potential and to avoid any parental concerns. Teachers should establish stable relationships with appropriate places of worship, ensuring that pre-visits are made and risk assessments carried out. The visits involve acknowledging rituals of respect in different faith traditions without any compulsion for pupils to take part in worship.

Parents who withdraw their children from a visit may cite physical safety as their concern. Sharing risk assessments with parents and case studies of successful school visits may help to alleviate their fears.

Some pupils may not have personally encountered many people from different faiths or cultures and with negative media coverage they may feel uneasy about the visit. Teachers should consider how to prepare pupils for a visit so they will be comfortable with any differences they see. This could include:

- A visit to the school by a representative of that faith
- Linking with a school with a contrasting cultural and/or faith background in the UK or abroad
- A virtual tour of a sacred space via the internet or film clips
- Before the visit learning about the features, the activities that happen there and its significance to worshippers
- Age appropriate opportunities to discuss controversial issues in the classroom. Philosophy for Children is an excellent way to manage effective discussion of controversial issues.
- Multi-cultural play resources and reading material available to pupils from EYFS onwards.

The purpose of all visits is educational, not to evangelise or proselytise so a visit should not compromise pupil’s own religious or non-religious beliefs. Out of respect there are appropriate ways

to dress and behave in the various places of worship. The pupils will be guests and will be treated with hospitality. It is important to help pupils to understand that these spaces are sacred to some people so they need to be sensitive to what is important to their hosts. This helps pupils to develop feelings of respect. The experience can help pupils to gain a greater appreciation of the awe, reverence and mystery that are fundamental features of religion.

Some parents may be sensitive about their children visiting a sacred space outside of their own belief tradition. It is important to reassure parents of the values and purposes of such visits and the educational benefits of learning about a range of faith traditions. Visits to sacred spaces make a significant contribution to many areas of the curriculum, not just RE and SMSC. Visits play a key role in preparing pupils for life in modern Britain and enabling pupils to develop respect for and sensitivity to others helping to combat prejudice.

Staffordshire SACRE has produced 3 RE units of learning that support visits to places of worship as a way of bringing a faith to life. For KS1 there is '1.2a worship', for KS2 '2.2b features and patterns of worship' KS3 '3.4a A Visit to a place of Worship'. These are available by emailing Emma Jardine-Phillips, Adviser to Staffordshire SACRE at emma.jardine@entrust-ed.co.uk

Any member of a belief community who supports Staffordshire Schools with their RE including visits to places of worship should adhere to this Code of Conduct:

- share your experiences and insights, without ever criticising the experience and beliefs of others or imposing your views on pupils in any way
- be familiar with the school's aims, ethos and policies and plan their involvement in the light of the curriculum at the school;
- use engaging teaching and learning methods that involve the pupils actively, and communicate at appropriate levels for the age group(s) concerned;
- respect and value the beliefs of any pupils and adults in the school when they are different from your own;
- develop ways of speaking to pupils that communicate an open approach, avoiding any hidden agenda to 'convert' or proselytise.

A key question to help you as a visitor reflect on your approach – the 'golden rule' of the conduct: 'If a member of another religion or belief visited your child's school and contributed in the same way that you have done, would you, as a parent, be happy with the education given?'

Adapted from the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) in their guidance document 'Religious believers visiting schools'

The following guidance on preventing and dealing with parental concerns to visits to places of worship was produced by Learning Outside the Classroom - www.lotc.org.uk

Guidance on Parental Objections to Visits to Places of Worship

Introduction

The issue of requests from parents to withdraw their children from visits to places of worship is a serious matter about which many of us are concerned. We share here some examples of good practice in the hope of averting problems. While objections are raised about visits to a number of places of worship, they are most frequently about visits to mosques, which raises the bigger issue of Islamophobia and how this can be addressed. The reasons for parental refusal vary greatly and include the cost of the trip as well as religious and other objections. We strongly recommend that schools always ask parents to explain their decision, whilst remembering that parents do have the right to withdraw their children from some or all of RE, on grounds of conscience.

Rationale

It is important to have a very clear rationale available to all parents and others about visits to places of worship. Reasons for arranging such visits include:

- Education is about extending pupils' knowledge, understanding and experience of the world and a visit to a place of worship can help do this
- Religion is an important factor in society for many people so it is essential that children have opportunities to explore religious practice and belief
- The experience of visiting a place of worship can help children to learn about religions but is NEVER about indoctrination or persuading them to agree with the beliefs of the religion being studied
- Educationists agree that experiential learning is more effective than simply learning from texts and electronic sources
- Pupils usually enjoy their visits and learning is enhanced
- A visit to a place of worship provides opportunities for pupils' cultural development by enabling them to experience new or different forms of art, architecture and music. Visits can contribute to community cohesion.
- There are always opportunities for cross-curricular learning and many aspects of the school curriculum can be studied through a religious building including the arts, literacy, history, mathematics and design
- The atmosphere of many places of worship can provide an opportunity for pupils to consider questions about life, religion and spirituality in ways that are impossible in classrooms
- Visits are part of a planned curriculum and are integral to the learning that will take place: to miss out on the visit would seriously impact on pupils' progress and understanding.
- Syllabuses for RE require that pupils should visit places of worship as part of the RE curriculum

Preventing a problem from arising

There are many ways in which teachers and governors can try to prevent a difficult situation arising in which a parent refuses to give permission. These include:

- Having a clear policy on which parents and pupils have been consulted, which has been ratified by the governing body and which is supported by all members of the school community. This can be incorporated in your RE policy
- Using parents' evenings, assemblies and displays to promote understanding of religious and cultural diversity and of previous visits to places of worship
- Being unequivocal in the school's approach to racism, stereotyping and prejudice
- Working with the local community to raise awareness e.g. the local Christian church supporting a visit to a mosque
- Having a period of preparation for the visit so that pupils' interest and enthusiasm are high

- Inviting a speaker from the religious community to come, with artefacts, to work with the children and answer questions
- Inviting a speaker from a religious community to work with governors, parents or staff prior to arranging a visit
 - Arranging a day for parents and /or governors to meet members of faith communities and visit a place of worship
 - Stressing the purpose of the visit to parents who might have a distorted view of what will happen – such as expecting participation in others’ worship or being coerced into accepting beliefs which differ from their own.

Preparing for the visit

Usually visits to places of worship have specific learning linked to the RE Syllabus so teachers need to plan carefully the learning that will take place as a consequence of the visit. There are many creative methods of teaching and learning that can be utilised to help prepare children for the visit. These include:

- using art to explore patterns, buildings, symbols and shapes and listening to music
- exploring artefacts - their use, meaning and design
- studying photographs, posters or videos of places of worship to devise research questions
- interviewing members of the community to understand what it means to belong to a religious community.

During the visit

To help pupils to realise that the building is about people in the present, as well as the past, they will have an opportunity to meet and talk to people who worship in the building. They will spend some time sitting in silence to appreciate the atmosphere, the splendour or simplicity of the building.

Pupils will be encouraged to consider questions in order to encourage respect, empathy and understanding e.g.:

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| • What interests you? | • What puzzles you? | • What questions do you want to ask? |
| • How does it feel to sit here? atmosphere? | | • What helps to give it this atmosphere? |
| • How might this building help people worship? people worship? | | • What clues are there about how people worship? |
| • What is similar here to other places of worship? | | • What is different here? |

Children may be asked to observe design, symbols, colours and objects and to consider their importance:

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| • Where are objects situated? Why? | • What is this for? Who uses it? |
| • What books are used? Why? When? When? | • Who uses this building? Why? |
- What posters and notices are there? What do they tell us about this worshipping community?

They may: listen to music; listen to a speaker from the faith community; take photos or video footage; draw things that interest them; follow a religious objects trail and make notes and sketch things of interest to them.

After the visit

Follow-up activities will often be cross curricular involving work in English, Art, History and Geography, as well as RE. Children may discuss key questions about the place that they visited and their experiences on the visit e.g.:

- What are the essential features of the place of worship?

- Why are places of worship different - even those belonging to the same religion or denomination?
- What do you think it means to the people who come here as worshippers?
- What surprised you?
- What did you find interesting?
- Did you learn anything that links to your own life and experiences?
- If the place were to be demolished and you could take one thing from it, what would it be?

Pupils could:

- Write letters of thanks to their host highlighting the aspects of the visit that interested them. This is an excellent opportunity to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
- Use books or other resources to compare with what they experienced
- Use their notes, drawings and photos to create a display, web site or an illustrated guidebook to the building showing its importance to the worshipping community. Place the display in the school, in the place of worship visited or in a local library. Use the display as the basis for assemblies with parents and other children.
- Recap the words used to describe the atmosphere inside the place of worship and write creatively or poetically about it, how they felt and what they saw
- Pupils could produce art or music to convey their thoughts and responses to the visit
- Pupils could produce models or drawings of religious objects and symbols
- Pupils could be set a design task that includes solving a problem e.g. how to make a building accessible for the disabled, or a building to encourage use by the wider community

The following SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS has been adapted from guidance produced by Surrey SACRE:

Note to schools: Please insert into this proforma specific visit details in the spaces provided, and remove any elements you don't need e.g. food requirements. It is recommended that you use this letter for all RE visits, including local churches.

Dear Parents and Carers,

As you know, we always try to provide opportunities for pupils to enhance their learning across the curriculum. Pupils have enjoyed visits linked to their learning in history and geography, and there are opportunities to visit places linked with other subjects. Such visits are valuable in enhancing our school's provision for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and in preparing pupils for life in modern Britain, with its increasingly diverse communities.

The pupils in Year..... are currently studying [name of religion] in RE as part of the locally Agreed Syllabus (which is the statutory document for RE in maintained schools in Staffordshire). A visit to [place of worship] is a fascinating opportunity for the pupils to get an insight into a modern [Christian / Muslim / Hindu / Jewish / Buddhist / Sikh] community and meet some of the lovely people who live and work there, including[names of hosts] who will be showing us round. We hope it will bring pupils' learning to life and allow them to be curious about the faith and its practices.

RE is an academic subject. It is taught as an understanding of different religions and beliefs, from an unbiased perspective. In our view, it is an essential part of the curriculum which is becoming more and more important as British society becomes more diverse. We feel strongly that pupils need a good understanding of different cultures, in order to learn respect for others and practise the values of acceptance, respect and unity. As part of this visit, pupils will **not** be asked to participate in worship, they might watch any worship or prayer that might happen during the visit. This visit has been planned by your child's teacher, who is leading the visit and working in partnership with [names of hosts] from the host community.

This visit will include: [insert details, especially referencing any 'voluntary' elements]

For this visit, pupils will need to wear..... [insert dress code]

For this visit, pupils will need to avoid bringing in their packed lunch or snack. These particular dress / food requirements are an outward token of respect for others' beliefs and sensitivities, and do not signify participation in worship.

For this visit, your child will also need:[insert details, especially any 'voluntary' contribution and what it covers e.g. coach, donation to host community etc.]

As with any school visit, we will need parent helpers to ensure adequate pupil: adult ratios. Please speak to your child's teacher if you can help.

We are really looking forward to this visit, and have been working closely with to plan an enriching and enjoyable experience. Do come and talk to us if you have any questions or concerns, or would like to come on the visit with your child.

Yours sincerely