



Department of

Education

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SUBJECT: Arrangements for withdrawal from Religious Education and Collective Worship in all grant-aided schools

DE Circular Number: 2026/09

Date of Issue: 3 February 2026

Target Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoG) of all grant-aided primary, post-primary schools and special schools with secondary departments;
- Education Authority (EA);
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS);
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG);
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE);
- Governing Bodies Association;
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA);
- General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI);
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service
- Controlled Schools' Support Council; and
- Teacher Unions.

Summary of Contents:

This circular, issued by the Department of Education, sets out the arrangements for withdrawal from Religious Education and collective worship in all grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland.

Enquiries:

Any enquiries about the content of this Circular should be addressed to:

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Governor Awareness:

Essential

Status of Contents:

For information and action by schools

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Introduction

1. Article 21 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 requires all publicly funded schools in Northern Ireland, except nursery schools, to provide Religious Education (RE) and collective worship.
2. The RE curriculum must include the core syllabus specified under Article 11 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 ([Religious Education Core Syllabus \(English version\)](#)). The syllabus sets out core matters, skills and processes to be taught.
3. The recent Supreme Court judgment did not quash this legislation. Schools must lawfully, therefore, continue to both teach RE and provide collective worship.
4. The Minister has announced plans to revise the RE core syllabus for implementation from September 2027. Interim guidance on the RE syllabus for the 2026-27 academic year will issue before the end of the current academic year.
- 5. The law provides an unqualified right for parents to withdraw their children wholly or partially from RE and/or collective worship, without the need to explain or justify their reasons.**
6. The recent Supreme Court Judgment has set out that the right of withdrawal from RE and collective worship should be practical, effective and free from any stigma. This means standardising and simplifying the procedures for withdrawal in schools.
7. This circular, therefore, sets out the arrangements that all schools must now implement to ensure a lawful, consistent and straightforward approach to withdrawal.

8. The Department intends to legislate to enable inspection of both RE and the arrangements for withdrawal from RE and collective worship. Schools should, therefore, ensure they can evidence compliance with this guidance.

The unqualified right of withdrawal: what the law requires

9. Parents have an unqualified statutory right to withdraw their child wholly or partially from RE and/or collective worship. Schools must facilitate this right without delay, negotiation or requirement to state reasons. Partial withdrawal (for example from a specified unit or activity) is permitted.

What do school need to do?

10. On admission of all pupils and annually thereafter, schools must provide parents with the following.
 - Details of the arrangements for the delivery of RE and collective worship in the school, including the topics to be covered in RE to each year group and likely guest speakers in RE and collective worship that academic year. It is appreciated that not all speakers will be confirmed at the beginning of the academic year and further updates may be required.
 - A neutral statement of the right to withdraw from RE and/or collective worship in full or in part.
 - A link/hard copy of the standard withdrawal form (proforma attached at **Annex A**).
 - A short explanation of alternative arrangements provided by the school for children withdrawn from either or both RE and collective worship.
 - A named contact for queries (normally the principal or a delegated senior leader).

The withdrawal process

11. Schools must have a simple, confidential process for parents to request withdrawal. This should include:

- acceptance of requests via either an online or paper version of the standard form;
- immediate acknowledgement of receipt (automatic email or same-day note); and
- confirmation within five school days of the start date and the alternative arrangements put in place.

12. Please note there must be no approval, negotiation or assessment process. Schools simply record the request and implement it. Parents must not be asked to explain their views or attend a meeting. A meeting may be offered only if a parent explicitly wishes to discuss options.

Partial Withdrawal

13. Partial withdrawal options should enable parents to specify withdrawal from:

- specific RE topics/units (e.g., miracles; prayer; confessional elements);
- activities/rituals (e.g., saying prayers, singing hymns, participation in liturgical acts);
- settings (e.g., whole-school collective worship assemblies).

14. Schools should ensure their procedures allow parents to specify the scope of withdrawal clearly and easily.

Alternative arrangements for pupils

15. Legally, schools must have appropriate arrangements in place for pupils who are withdrawn. These must:

- be meaningful, age-appropriate and supervised;
- avoid isolating or stigmatising pupils;
- be designed so that pupils are not incentivised to withdraw (arrangements such as additional one-to-one tuition should not be offered); and
- be ready to implement immediately, without requiring schools to develop individual bespoke solutions.

16. Examples of suitable arrangements include supervised reading, quiet study, play or other supervised activities.

Record-keeping

17. Schools must keep a confidential register detailing:

- the pupil's name;
- whether the withdrawal is full or partial;
- date the arrangements begin;
- alternative arrangements put in place.

18. Parents do not need to renew the withdrawal annually. Arrangements remain in place until the parent withdraws the request.

School gatherings

19. To minimise any adverse impact of withdrawal, schools should ensure that collective worship is not the only forum for sharing school announcements, rewards or celebrations.

20. In addition to collective worship, schools should ensure there is at least one non-religious collective school gathering each term to celebrate achievements and share information. All key information should also be provided electronically to parents or to pupils at registration.

Timeline and Next Steps

21. Schools should adopt this withdrawal policy immediately. By the end of **Spring Term 2026**, all schools should

- inform parents of the right of withdrawal and provide all required information and forms;
- ensure a confidential process and register are in place; and
- ensure all staff are briefed on the arrangements for withdrawal from RE and/or collective worship.

Summary of Requirements

22. In summary, schools must ensure the following arrangements are in place.

- Parents are informed at admission and annually of the right to withdraw and of the school's arrangements.
- Withdrawal is facilitated through a simple, confidential form, without reasons or explanations.
- Requests are granted immediately and confirmed within five school days.
- Partial withdrawal is permitted.
- Schools have appropriate, non-stigmatising alternative arrangements in place.
- Withdrawn children should participate in meaningful, supervised alternative activities (for example, quiet study, reading or other supervised activities).
- A confidential register is maintained.
- Collective worship is not the primary vehicle for school-wide communication.
- Non-religious school gatherings are held at least once per term.

Suzanne Kingon

Suzanne Kingon

Deputy Secretary

Policy, Delivery and Infrastructure

Section 1: Pupil Details

Name of pupil: _____

Year group/class: _____

Section 2: Parent/Carer Details

Name of parent/carers submitting this request:

Relationship to pupil: _____

Preferred contact email: _____

Preferred contact phone number: _____

Section 3: Request for Withdrawal

(Please tick all that apply)

I request that my child be withdrawn from:

Religious Education

- All RE
- Specific RE topics/units (please specify):

Collective Worship

- All collective worship
- Specific elements of collective worship (please specify e.g. prayers, hymns, liturgical acts, assembly, particular speakers):

Section 4: Start Date

I request that withdrawal arrangements begin:

Immediately

or

From (date): ____ / ____ / ____

Section 5: Confirmation

By signing below, I confirm that I am exercising my statutory right to withdraw my child from Religious Education and/or collective worship (delete as appropriate) understand that:

- I do not need to give reasons for this request;
- The school must implement this request promptly and without negotiation;
- This request will remain in place until I submit a written request to end or amend it.

Signature of parent/carer: _____

Date: ____ / ____ / ____

Section 6: School Use Only (to be completed by the school)

Date received: ____ / ____ / ____

Acknowledgement issued:

Yes – date: ____ / ____ / ____

Arrangements begin: ____ / ____ / ____

Alternative arrangements provided:

Recorded in confidential register:

Yes – date: ____ / ____ / ____

Name of staff member processing request: