

## Parental withdrawal from children's visits to inner city places of worship.

Parents have the legal right to withdraw their children from all or part of Religious Education.

Fear and prejudice stem from lack of understanding brought about by ignorance, lack of personal experience and, to some extent, attitudes expressed in the media. If someone has never met a black person, a Muslim, a Hindu or a member of any other group seen as being "different" from what people believe to be a norm, then it is not surprising that ignorance overcomes tolerance resulting in fear and prejudice.

The fact is that the norm in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, as it has been for hundreds of years, is that we are a society containing people from a wide variety of different backgrounds and with a wide variety of different beliefs.

The news is frequently filled with people doing terrible things allegedly on behalf of their religion or belief and those with no contact with different groups can quickly adopt prejudices out of fear - *"I don't want my kids going down Normanton with all those Muslims – they're killing our lads in Afghanistan and I don't want my kids to have anything to do with it."*

Religious extremism is very much on the public mind and it is easy for the majority to get tarred with the same brush as the minority.

It is therefore vital that young people have an opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds and with different beliefs. Only by seeing those who are "different" do young people come to the conclusion that the humanity we share is stronger than the beliefs that sometimes divide us. It is much more difficult to condemn someone you have shared a meal with than it is to condemn someone you have never met.

Religions have a major role to play in this process. It is difficult to promote understanding and tolerance when religions sometimes lack understanding, behave intolerantly and demand special privileges for themselves. At a recent Open Centre Twilight Event a primary school RE co-ordinator felt that a parent was expressing ignorance of Christianity when, after being told by the teacher that she believed in Jesus, asked *"Do you believe in Santa Claus then?"* The teacher felt the parent was equating Jesus with Santa Claus when in fact the parent was being ironic. The teacher did not understand that, to the parent, all forms of supernatural and superstitious belief are the same.

No matter what the best efforts of organisations like the Open Centre, it will not help if religions continue to promote ideas that the majority of the population, particularly young people, find unacceptable – specifically in relation to sex, gender and sexuality.

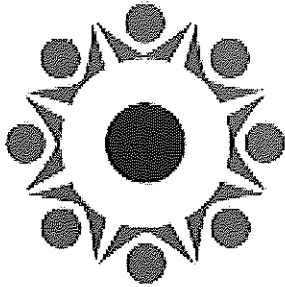
Parents' decisions about withdrawal from inner city visits should be informed decisions. It is vitally important that parents are given the full background and justification for such visits before being asked to make a decision.

The Trustees of the Open Centre would like to ask the SACRE to actively promote opportunities for pupils to meet people from different backgrounds and with different beliefs. Specifically we would ask the SACRE to co-operate with Derbyshire SACRE to:

- 1) draw up background material to be provided to parents before the issue of visits is even raised.
- 2) provide guidelines to head teachers in relation to withdrawal. Such guidelines could anticipate potential withdrawal and provide a strategy to minimise it – parents' evening's, parents'/PTA pre-visits to the Open Centre etc.
- 3) determine the best way to find out why parents withdraw their children from visits. It is not good enough to simply say *"parents have the right to withdraw and that right should not be challenged."* That is not the same as saying *"we should not bother to find out what motivates parents to withdraw their children from such visits."* Parents have a long-term social obligation to their children, just as schools and wider society do. We are all answerable to one another for our decisions.

**Note:** it is a requirement of the Agreed Syllabus for RE, Department of Education guidelines, the government's Social Cohesion initiatives and numerous Ofsted and other reports that pupils are provided with the opportunity to meet those from different backgrounds and with different beliefs.

The Open Centre staff and Trustees would be very happy to assist the SACRE in this task.



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## **Clerk to Derby City SACRE – For Members of Derby City SACRE**

We have recently become aware that the right of withdrawal from RE is being used by parents in Derby and Derbyshire as a disguise for fear and prejudice. Indeed, the right of withdrawal does not sit very easily with a child's right to education.

We are concerned that parents are refusing to allow their children to visit inner-city Derby, particularly mosques, out of irrational fear rather than religious conviction.

There is a worry that such fears are based on and fed by views expressed in the popular press and by extremist political parties. History teaches us of the disastrous consequences if such fears and prejudices are not dealt with.

This comes at a time when schools are legally required to promote social cohesion and OFSTED has commented that this consists of much more than ticking boxes but rather lies at the heart of schools' day to day life.

The City and County have excellent records in opposing ignorance, prejudice and discrimination and we would like to propose that the two Authorities work together to end parental withdrawal from Open Centre visits.

We would like to suggest a joint approach co-ordinated by Graham Falgate and Steve Ford, involving councillors and staff and trustees of the Open Centre. This Joint Approach would involve:

1) Draft guidance for headteachers to be considered by Derby and Derbyshire SACRE and, when agreed, to be put out jointly.

2) Where parents request withdrawal from visits, attempts are made to find out why and address any fears. The Open Centre will help develop strategies for overcoming such fears.

3) Anticipating problems;

a) Social cohesion, including such things as Open Centre visits should be included in school prospectuses and websites (and the reasons for them) and stress placed on letting pupils see how things are for themselves

b) A leaflet could be sent to parents at the beginning of each school year with anticipated visits (and the reasons for them)

c) PTAs should be encouraged to arrange similar visits, so that parents can know what is involved from their own experience

d) Prior to any visits, parents can be invited to a session where social cohesion and the reason for such visits are addressed

4) Media campaign by City and County to promote the benefits of understanding and talking to each other.

5) A positive attempt should be made to find Muslims, especially women, who are willing to talk about their way of life and what it means to them, to try to dispel the prejudice of anonymity and to give a real, human face to Islam. The Open Centre can help find suitable speakers.

We look forward to hearing your views on this matter and would appreciate it if this could be discussed on the next agenda for Derby City and Derbyshire County SACRE meetings.

Yours sincerely



Laura Connolly

Chief Executive

On behalf of Trustees of the Open Centre

cc. Steve Ford, Graham Falgate, Clerk to Derbyshire County SACRE, David Connor, Cnlr Pat Murray, Cnlr Carol Hart.