



HL Bill 35 of 2024–25

Education (Assemblies) Bill [HL]

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The [Education \(Assemblies\) Bill \[HL\]](#) is a private member's bill introduced by Baroness Burt of Solihull (Liberal Democrat). It would repeal the requirement for schools in England without a designated religious character to provide daily acts of collective religious worship. In its place, the bill would establish a new duty to provide non-religious assemblies which develop the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural education of pupils. It is due to have its second reading in the House of Lords on 7 February 2025.

I. What does the bill aim to do?

Baroness Burt has described the purpose of her bill as follows:

The UK is the only sovereign state in the world to impose Christian worship in state schools as standard. Many parents are unaware that compulsory worship takes place in their children's schools, or that they have a right to withdraw their children from it. However, there is no meaningful alternative to worship offered in the vast majority of schools, so parents are forced to choose between exposing their children to daily acts of worship or isolating them from their peers with little or nothing of educational worth to do.

My bill would be inclusive of all children and follows the recent recommendation from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to repeal collective worship in schools. It would liberate schools to instead use the valuable time gained to cover themes such as the environment and nature, physical and mental health, charity and volunteering, relationships and self-esteem, moral and ethical issues, humanitarian causes, historical events, and arts and culture, and equality and non-discrimination, while not precluding education about religions and humanism.¹

¹ Text provided by Baroness Burt to the House of Lords Library in 2021.





The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has called for the repeal of legislation concerning collective worship in schools. The most recent report from the committee to recommend the repeal of collective worship in publicly funded schools in England, Wales and other parts of the UK was published in 2023.²

Baroness Burt is a vice chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group.³ She introduced an iteration of the Education (Assemblies) Bill [HL] during the 2019–21 session.⁴ However, the bill did not receive a second reading before the end of the parliamentary session and therefore fell. Baroness Burt reintroduced the bill during the 2021–22 session.⁵ This iteration of the bill completed all of its stages in the House of Lords. However, the bill did not receive second reading in the House of Commons and fell at the end of the session. The wording of the Education (Assemblies) Bill [HL] introduced during the 2024–25 session is identical to the version of the bill introduced during the 2021–22 session.

2. What are the current requirements for collective worship?

Under [section 70 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#), each pupil attending a community, foundation or voluntary school in England is required to take part in an act of collective worship each school day. [Schedule 20, paragraph 3\(2\) of the same act](#) requires schools without a religious character to provide collective worship that is “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character”. However, schools (or groups of pupils within schools) may be exempted from this requirement. Any exemption is considered by the standing advisory council on religious education for that local authority. This body advises local authorities and schools on the provision of religious education in a local authority area. [Under section 71 of the 1998 act](#), a parent may request that a pupil below the age of 16 be wholly or partly excused from attending acts of religious worship. Pupils aged over 16 may excuse themselves from these acts of worship.

² UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, ‘[Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#)’, 22 June 2023, p 8.

³ UK Parliament, ‘[Register of All-Party Parliamentary Groups \(as at 2 January 2025\): Humanist](#)’, accessed 29 January 2025.

⁴ UK Parliament, ‘[Education \(Assemblies\) Bill \[HL\]: Session 2019–21](#)’, accessed 29 January 2025. The text of this bill was not published.

⁵ UK Parliament, ‘[Education \(Assemblies\) Bill \[HL\]: Session 2021–22](#)’, accessed 29 January 2025.



3. What would the bill do?

The [Education \(Assemblies\) Bill \[HL\]](#) is a short bill containing three clauses and one schedule. Clause 1 of the bill would amend section 70 of the 1998 act. This would remove the requirement to provide acts of collective worship in the following types of schools in England:

- maintained schools without a religious character
- non-maintained special schools
- city technical colleges
- academies without a religious character

Clause 1(4) of the bill would also create a new requirement for these schools to provide assemblies which are “principally directed towards furthering the spiritual, moral, social and cultural education of the pupils regardless of religion or belief”.

Under these provisions, schools would be unable to organise acts of worship or other religious observance. However, staff or pupils of a school would be able to arrange voluntary acts of worship on school premises. Parents or guardians of children aged under 16 would be able to request that their child should not attend these acts of voluntary worship.

Clause 2 of the bill and schedule 1 would make a series of consequential amendments. Clause 3 would establish the territorial extent of the bill as England and Wales only. The bill’s provisions only affect schools in England. Clause 3 would also set the commencement date for the legislation as the start of the first full academic year after royal assent.

4. What have the government and others said?

Andrew Copson, chief executive of Humanists UK, has welcomed the bill, arguing it is “inappropriate for the state to be imposing a particular religion on any child”.⁶ The National Secular Society has also welcomed the bill, stating current requirements concerning

⁶ Humanists UK, [‘New bills in Lords to tackle collective worship and illegal faith schools’](#), 19 July 2024.



collective worship are “not appropriate for the diverse, multi-belief society that the UK is today”.⁷

Commenting on the proposals in the bill when it was introduced in 2021, Nigel Genders, the Church of England’s chief education officer, argued daily acts of collective worship should be retained in schools.⁸ He described them as: ‘[...] a powerful tool in bringing pupils together, giving them a rare opportunity to pause and reflect in the midst of a busy day’. During second reading of the Education (Assemblies) Bill [HL] in September 2021, the Bishop of Oxford argued that the benefits of collective worship also included fostering common values and already provided a firm basis for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils.⁹

During the earlier bill’s second reading in 2021, Baroness Chisholm of Owlpen, then a government whip, said the Conservative government did not support the bill because it believed the existing legislation already allowed sufficient flexibility for schools.¹⁰ For example, she said there was an exemption from Christian worship for schools where the principal religion was not Christianity. She also noted that children were not forced to take part in collective worship against their will. During the same debate, Lord Watson of Invergowrie, then shadow spokesperson for education, said Labour would not express an opinion for or against the bill.¹¹ However, Lord Watson said Labour saw the bill as “a useful exercise in opening a debate about the future of collective worship in schools”. He said Labour would support a public consultation to assess opinion on the continuation of collective worship in school assemblies.

The current Labour government has not yet proposed any changes to the current requirements for holding assemblies.

⁷ National Secular Society, [‘Bill to end collective worship in most schools to be introduced’](#), 19 July 2024; and Politics.co.uk, [‘New bill proposes to replace compulsory worship with inclusive assemblies’](#), 14 May 2021.

⁸ Dave Speck, [‘Legislation to end compulsory daily worship proposed’](#), Times Education Supplement (£), 21 May 2021.

⁹ [HL Hansard, 10 September 2021, cols 1085–6.](#)

¹⁰ [HL Hansard, 10 September 2021, cols 1093–5.](#)

¹¹ [HL Hansard, 10 September 2021, col 1091.](#)

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