St Paul's High School, Bessbrook

Withdrawal from Religious Education and Collective Worship Policy

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1. Mission Statement

1.1 We at St Paul's High School are committed to providing a loving and caring atmosphere which embodies our Catholic ethos in which the children can grow and develop to their full potential in all aspects of their lives.

2. Statement of Aims

2.1 Religious Education (RE) and collective worship are central to the Catholic ethos of St Paul's High School and to the formation of the whole person. We offer them as an invitation, in a spirit of welcome and respect.

2.2 We recognise and fully respect the statutory right of every parent/carer to withdraw their child, wholly or partially, from RE and/or collective worship.

2.3 We aim to ensure that:

- parents/carers are clearly and neutrally informed of the school's RE and collective worship provision and of their right to withdraw;
- the right of withdrawal is practical, effective and free from any stigma, in line with the recent Supreme Court judgment;
- requests are implemented promptly, confidentially and without negotiation;
- pupils who are withdrawn take part in meaningful, supervised alternative arrangements and continue to feel fully valued members of the school community; and
- the school can evidence compliance with Department of Education (DE) Circular 2026/09.

3. Legal and Policy Context

3.1 Article 21 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 requires all publicly funded schools in Northern Ireland, except nursery schools, to provide RE and collective worship.

3.2 The RE curriculum must include the core syllabus specified under Article 11 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. The core syllabus sets out the core matters, skills and processes to be taught.

3.3 The recent Supreme Court judgment did not quash this legislation. St Paul's High School will therefore continue both to teach RE and to provide collective worship.

3.4 The judgment set out that the right of withdrawal must be practical, effective and free from any stigma. DE Circular 2026/09, Arrangements for withdrawal from Religious Education and Collective Worship in all grant-

aided schools (3 February 2026), sets out the standardised arrangements that all schools must implement. This policy gives effect to that circular.

3.5 The Minister has announced plans to revise the RE core syllabus for implementation from September 2027. This policy will be reviewed in light of the revised syllabus and any associated guidance.

3.6 The Department intends to legislate to enable inspection of both RE and the arrangements for withdrawal. The school will therefore maintain records which evidence compliance with this policy.

3.7 This policy should be read alongside the school's Admissions, Data Protection, Safeguarding and Child Protection, Special Educational Needs and Newcomer policies.

4. Key Principles

4.1 The school has adopted the following key principles:

- Parents/carers have an unqualified statutory right to withdraw their child wholly or partially from RE and/or collective worship.
- Parents/carers do not need to explain or justify their reasons, and will not be asked to do so.
- There is no approval, negotiation or assessment process. The school simply records the request and implements it.
- Parents/carers will not be asked to attend a meeting. A meeting will be offered only where a parent/carer explicitly wishes to discuss options.
- All requests and records are treated as confidential.
- Pupils who are withdrawn will not be isolated, singled out or treated less favourably in any way.
- Alternative arrangements will be meaningful, but will not be designed in a way that incentivises withdrawal.
- Withdrawal remains in place until the parent/carer requests in writing that it is ended or amended; it does not need to be renewed annually.

5. Religious Education and Collective Worship at St Paul's

5.1 Religious Education

5.1.1 RE is taught to all year groups by the Religious Studies Department in accordance with the core syllabus and the guidance of the Catholic Trustees. At Key Stage 4 and post-16, pupils may also follow examination courses in Religious Studies.

5.1.2 Each year the Head of Religious Studies will provide a summary of the topics/units to be covered by each year group, together with the likely guest speakers for that academic year.

5.2 Collective Worship

5.2.1 Collective worship at St Paul's may include prayer in form class and in lessons, year group and whole-school assemblies, Masses and other liturgical celebrations, sacramental opportunities, retreats and the singing of hymns.

5.2.2 The school will provide parents/carers with a summary of the forms of collective worship planned for the year and, where known, the likely guest speakers. As not all speakers will be confirmed at the start of the year, updates will be provided to parents/carers as they become available.

6. Information for Parents/Carers

6.1 On admission of every pupil, and annually thereafter at the start of each academic year, the school will provide parents/carers with:

- details of the arrangements for the delivery of RE and collective worship, including the topics to be covered in RE by each year group and likely guest speakers in RE and collective worship;
- a neutral statement of the right to withdraw from RE and/or collective worship, in full or in part;
- a link to, or a hard copy of, the standard withdrawal form (Appendix 1);
- a short explanation of the alternative arrangements provided for pupils who are withdrawn (Section 8); and
- a named contact for queries.

6.2 The named contact for all queries is Mr Colm Murphy, Vice-Principal (Curriculum), who can be contacted by email at cmurphy653@c2ken.net or through school reception.

6.3 This information will be published on the school website and issued electronically to parents/carers. Paper copies are available from school reception on request. In line with the school's Newcomer Policy, the school will use plain English and, where available, interpreters or translated documents to ensure all families can access this information.

7. The Withdrawal Process

7.1 Making a Request

7.1.1 Parents/carers may request withdrawal at any time using the standard withdrawal form (Appendix 1), which follows the proforma at Annex A of DE Circular 2026/09.

7.1.2 The form may be submitted either online or on paper. Completed paper forms should be returned to school reception in a sealed envelope marked "Confidential – for the attention of Mr C Murphy, Vice-Principal (Curriculum)". Completed forms may also be emailed to cmurphy653@c2ken.net.

7.1.3 A request will not be refused or delayed because it is not on the standard form. Any clear written request from a parent/carer will be accepted and recorded.

7.2 Acknowledgement and Confirmation

7.2.1 The school will acknowledge receipt of every request immediately, by automatic email for online submissions or by a same-day note or email for paper submissions.

7.2.2 Within five school days of receipt, the school will confirm in writing to the parent/carer:

- the date on which the withdrawal arrangements begin; and
- the alternative arrangements put in place for their child.

7.2.3 Where a parent/carer has asked for withdrawal to begin immediately, arrangements will be implemented without waiting for written confirmation to issue.

7.3 Partial Withdrawal

7.3.1 Parents/carers may request partial withdrawal. The standard form allows them to specify clearly and easily withdrawal from:

- specific RE topics or units (for example, miracles, prayer or confessional elements);
- activities or rituals (for example, saying prayers, singing hymns or participation in liturgical acts); and/or
- settings (for example, whole-school collective worship assemblies or particular speakers).

7.3.2 Where partial withdrawal from specified RE units is requested, the Head of Religious Studies will ensure that the relevant class teacher(s) know which

lessons are affected, so that alternative arrangements are in place for those lessons.

7.4 Amending or Ending a Withdrawal

7.4.1 A withdrawal remains in place, including across academic years, until the parent/carer submits a written request to end or amend it. Such requests will be acknowledged and implemented in the same way as an original request.

8. Alternative Arrangements for Pupils

8.1 The school has standing alternative arrangements which are ready to implement immediately, without the need to develop individual bespoke solutions. All arrangements will be:

- meaningful, age-appropriate and supervised;
- designed to avoid isolating or stigmatising pupils; and
- designed so that pupils are not incentivised to withdraw. For this reason, additional one-to-one tuition or other enhanced provision will not be offered.

8.2 Religious Education lessons: pupils will undertake supervised reading or quiet study, either within the classroom or in a designated supervised space (normally the school library), as the school considers most appropriate to the pupil's circumstances.

8.3 Collective worship in form class: pupils may remain in the room quietly and respectfully without participating, or may wait in a nearby supervised space for the duration of the prayer.

8.4 Assemblies, Masses and liturgical celebrations: pupils will attend a designated supervised space for quiet reading or study for the duration of the act of worship, rejoining their class immediately afterwards.

8.5 Where withdrawal is from specific elements only (for example, hymns or prayers), pupils may remain present for the non-religious parts of an assembly or event without being required to participate in the elements from which they have been withdrawn.

8.6 Supervision of pupils will at all times be in line with the school's Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy.

9. Record Keeping and Confidentiality

9.1 The school will maintain a confidential register of withdrawal recording:

- the pupil's name;

- whether the withdrawal is full or partial, and its scope;
- the date the arrangements begin; and
- the alternative arrangements put in place.

9.2 The register will also record the date each request was received, the date acknowledgement was issued and the date written confirmation was sent, so that the school can evidence compliance with the timescales in Section 7.

9.3 The register will be held securely and electronically by the named contact. Access will be limited to those staff who need the information to implement the arrangements, such as the Head of Religious Studies, relevant RE teachers, Heads of Year and form teachers.

9.4 Completed withdrawal forms and correspondence will be stored securely and processed in accordance with UK GDPR, the Data Protection Act 2018 and the school's Data Protection Policy and records retention schedule.

9.5 Staff will not discuss a pupil's withdrawal with other pupils or in any public setting.

10. School Gatherings and Communication

10.1 To minimise any adverse impact of withdrawal, collective worship will not be the only forum for sharing school announcements, rewards or celebrations.

10.2 In addition to collective worship, the school will hold at least one non-religious collective school gathering each term to celebrate achievement and share information.

10.3 All key information will also be provided electronically to parents/carers or shared with pupils at registration, so that no pupil misses information because they have been withdrawn.

11. Roles and Responsibilities

11.1 The Board of Governors will ratify this policy, ensure that the school complies with DE Circular 2026/09, and receive an annual report on its implementation.

11.2 The Principal has overall responsibility for implementing this policy and has delegated the role of named contact to the Vice-Principal (Curriculum).

11.3 The named contact will receive and acknowledge requests, confirm arrangements within five school days, maintain the confidential register and inform relevant staff.

11.4 The Head of Religious Studies will provide the annual summary of RE topics and guest speakers and ensure that RE teachers implement alternative arrangements for withdrawn pupils.

11.5 Heads of Year and form teachers will ensure that alternative arrangements for collective worship, assemblies and liturgies are implemented sensitively.

11.6 All staff will follow this policy, respect confidentiality and treat withdrawn pupils with the same care and respect as all pupils.

12. Staff Development

12.1 All staff will be briefed on this policy and on the arrangements for withdrawal from RE and/or collective worship. Briefings will form part of the induction of new staff and will be repeated whenever the arrangements change.

13. Review and Evaluation of Policy

13.1 The named contact will report annually to the Board of Governors on the number and type of withdrawal requests received (without identifying individual pupils), compliance with the required timescales, and the effectiveness of the alternative arrangements.

13.2 This policy will be reviewed at least every two years by the Principal in consultation with staff and Governors, and earlier if required by changes in legislation, DE guidance or the revised RE core syllabus due from September 2027.

Appendix 1: Standard Withdrawal Form

St Paul's High School, Bessbrook

Request for Withdrawal from Religious Education and/or Collective Worship

Parents/carers have a statutory right to withdraw their child wholly or partially from Religious Education (RE) and/or collective worship. You do not need to give any reason. The school will acknowledge your request immediately and confirm the start date and alternative arrangements within five school days. All information is treated confidentially.

Section 1: Pupil Details	
Name of pupil	
Year group / class	

Section 2: Parent/Carer Details	
Name of parent/carer submitting this request	
Relationship to pupil	
Preferred contact email	
Preferred contact phone number	

Section 3: Request for Withdrawal

I request that my child be withdrawn from (please tick all that apply):

Religious Education

☐ All RE

☐ Specific RE topics/units *(please specify below)*

_____

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) and 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	
Confirmation issued (within 5 school days)	
Arrangements begin	
Alternative arrangements provided	
Recorded in confidential register	
Staff member processing request	

Please return this form to school reception in a sealed envelope marked "Confidential – for the attention of Mr C Murphy, Vice-Principal (Curriculum)", or by email to cmurphy653@c2ken.net.