

Declaration by the German Humanist Association (HVD)

## **Ethics courses for all and “Humanist Lebenskunde” as an alternative to religious instruction**

**In support of more freedom for ethical and religious-philosophical orientations at schools in the Federal Republic of Germany**

1. **State schools should promote the unrestricted development of their pupils’ personalities. This includes the development of the capacity to freely choose an orientation in the area of ethical and religious or philosophical convictions.** Freedom and self-determination are cultivated by a well-grounded system of general education. If a state school offers additional courses focusing on a particular denomination, it must ensure that such courses are commensurate with existing religious and philosophical convictions in society at large. Preferential treatment of and discrimination against confessional communities and pupils on account of their religion or philosophical worldview are unconstitutional. In the coming years, the Humanist Association intends to lobby emphatically for more freedom of choice with regard to ethical and religious-philosophical orientations at German schools. The aim is, on the one hand, to introduce changes to ethics courses<sup>1</sup> and, on the other, to ensure the equal treatment of “*Humanist Lebenskunde*” and religious instruction as school subjects across the country.
2. **The German Humanist Association emphatically supports the teaching of ethics subjects that are obligatory for all pupils and completely independent of subjects dedicated to religious and philosophical worldviews.** These ethics subjects should encourage pupils to engage with important existential questions, ethical positions, religions and philosophical worldviews in a way that enables them to develop their own religious and philosophical orientations independently and to discover differences and common ground in dialog with others. The Humanist Association opposes attempts by the churches to undermine the obligatory character of Life Conduct-Ethics-Religious Instruction (LER) courses in Brandenburg and to abolish ethics courses for all pupils in Berlin in favour of elective subjects.
3. **The teaching of ethics in state schools, whether as a common, optional or alternative subject, is obligated to maintain religious-philosophical neutrality. This means that humanism, atheism and agnosticism should in principle be accorded the same status in the curriculum as Christianity and other religions.** Ultimately it is important to ensure that religions, confessions and philosophical worldviews are treated in a balanced way in lessons and that this reflects the existing roles of religious and philosophical ori-

---

<sup>1</sup> In this declaration, the concept of ethics courses covers all so-called “ethics subjects” taught in the federal states of Germany. These include Ethics, Ethics/Philosophy, Practical Philosophy, Values and Norms, and Life Conduct-Ethics-Religious Instruction (LER).

entations in the wider society. In addition, critical engagement with fundamentalist positions and socially destructive manifestations of religion and philosophical worldviews must be promoted on the basis of scholarship and the system of values enshrined in the federal constitution. In this regard, the Humanist Association sees the need for considerable changes in a number of Germany's federal states. The critique of religion is insufficiently integrated in the many ethics curricula. Moreover, non-religious positions such as humanism, atheism and agnosticism, as well as the tradition of the Enlightenment that has played such an important role for Europe, are often not represented at all. These anomalies, which are also found in the training and further training of ethics teachers in a number of federal states, must be overcome.

- 4. The monopoly of the Christian churches with regard to denomination-based courses at state schools is no longer in keeping with the times. Approximately a third of the German population does not profess to any religion, and a large proportion has a humanistic view of life. The historically conditioned monopolies in the area of religion or philosophical worldviews should be done away with. The Humanist Association is striving to ensure that an increasing number of pupils in Germany can choose freely between religious instruction and “*Humanist Lebenskunde*” as school subjects.** The Association rejects the concept of religious instruction as a compulsory subject from which students can apply for exemption. Outside Berlin and Brandenburg, where since 1984 and 2007 respectively “*Humanist Lebenskunde*” has been taught as a school subject, our state associations have submitted applications for the introduction of this subject in North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony and Bavaria. Other member associations are currently preparing similar applications. In cases where applications are not approved by state governments, appeals based on the Basic Law are lodged with the courts; in November 2007 legal action was already initiated in North Rhine-Westphalia. Based on Articles 3, 4 and 140 of the German Basic Law and the European Convention on Human Rights, our association assumes that this legal action will be successful. In cases where the complete freedom of choice between religious instruction and “*Humanist Lebenskunde*” has not yet been established<sup>2</sup>, *Lebenskunde* courses should - like religious instruction - be offered for the time being as an elective for those pupils who, based on their own or their parents’ choice, do not want to attend religious instruction and who do not feel that ethics courses adequately address the traditions of humanism and the Enlightenment.

The HVD assumes that the introduction of “*Humanist Lebenskunde*” in the different German federal states will promote the desire for a new model in which obligatory, general ethics courses will be supplemented by courses in religious instruction and/or philosophical worldviews that pupils are completely free to take or not.

The Humanist Association intends to continue its efforts to improve the content and structure of ethics courses in schools and ensure that “*Humanist Lebenskunde*” is established as an attractive alternative to religious instruction in the coming years. In this way it hopes to contribute to a systemic change in the values-based courses offered in state schools in Germany.

**National Delegates Conference  
11 January 2008**

---

<sup>2</sup> This refers to cases in which religious instruction is a compulsory subject for members of denomination unless they apply for exemption or an elective subject.