

A faith ethos is no magic solution for improving schools

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There are success stories and failures in schools of all types, including faith schools, despite what the churches would have people believe. NSS vice president Alistair McBay debunks the myth that 'faith school' is a byword for success.

2016 was another interesting year in the faith school industry. The aftermath of the Trojan Horse school episode in Birmingham rumbled on, while the scandal of unregistered illegal Jewish schools in Hackney and elsewhere hit the headlines (again). Our new Prime Minister made news with her intention to relax faith school admission rules, to great rejoicing by those who advocate exclusion as the new inclusion.

At the end of the year tripping over into 2017, it was the turn of Christian fundamentalists to be caught in the Ofsted headlights, with the Accelerated Christian Education schools being downgraded. Aside from current concerns over the curriculum being taught in ACE schools, there are historic allegations to be investigated concerning corporal punishment, exorcisms being performed on children and girls being "groomed" for marriage to much older men, although predictably [Christian Concern](#) has wasted no time in playing the now depressingly familiar 'persecuted victim' card in an attempted defence of what is clearly indefensible.

I read these stories of children at risk through poor to non-existent governance and leadership, and/or poor quality teaching and was reminded of an experiment I conducted three years ago, when the manipulative PR exercise lauding the success of faith schools of the 'mainstream' variety appeared to be in full swing. One evening I spent ten minutes on Google searching for Catholic and Church of England schools in special measures and Google instantaneously produced a slew of results for schools of both kinds. I was surprised there were so many results for faith schools, given the very public claims of how wonderful they are. Please note that my search was done some two years after [religious leaders had been lauding](#) the then Coalition government for 'understanding' the faith school sector much better than the previous Labour administration, and for showing 'heartfelt sympathy' for religious educators. Yet when I examined the Google results and the Ofsted source reports, I saw plenty of examples of poor management and leadership, poor governance, low literacy and numeracy achievement, homophobic bullying, racism, casual ethnic and 'cultural' segregation, with disabled or special needs children left behind all regularly featured, and of course many, many more children are at risk than in the more fundamentalist faith-based establishments. Maybe some of the Government's understanding and sympathy was misplaced.

So if a religious ethos is promoted so forcefully and regularly as the reason for faith schools being successful, backed up by the Government, why are so many of them failing in these important ways? Can we blame the religious ethos for failure in the same way the religious tout it as the reason for success? The litany of problems listed above are not exclusive to fundamentalist schools in our midst by any means, but they go to show that a faith ethos is no solution on its own.

Here are just the top Google search results (there were many more, from all over England and Wales).

1) In October 2013, Ofsted inspectors reported on [St Joseph's Catholic Primary in Birmingham](#) rating it as 'inadequate' as to its leadership, the quality of teaching and the behaviour and safety of children. One parent told the local newspaper, "As a middle class, affluently placed school, we expect better," as revealing a comment as ever was. Many parents were so concerned that they offered their services as teaching assistants free of charge.

2) "Despite very recent improvements, leaders, managers and governors have not addressed the shortcomings identified in the previous inspection and have not significantly slowed the decline in the school's performance." This was the Ofsted verdict in January 2013 on St Edmund's Catholic School, Dover.

3) In January 2013, Ofsted reported on St Francis Catholic Primary in Stratford: "The school's leaders and managers do not check on the progress made by pupils rigorously. They do not have effective systems for managing the performance of teachers to ensure good quality teaching for all pupils and are not effective in promoting and securing improvements quickly enough. They do not have the capacity to improve without external support. The governing body has not met its responsibility to ensure that school leaders provide an acceptable standard of education for all groups of pupils."

4) In April 2014 [a local newspaper](#) reported that a Sheerness school was making "reasonable" progress towards exiting special measures. St Edward's Catholic Primary, in New Road, was rated as inadequate by Ofsted in March 2013. It was deemed to have serious weaknesses in the achievement of its 210 pupils, the quality of teaching and leadership and management. The Inspectors noted: "Although the quality of teaching is improving, there is not enough permanent, good teaching to make sure that pupils learn consistently well."

5) "A renewed drive to raise standards is being pursued by St Anne's Catholic Primary School following a disappointing Ofsted report published last week which places the school in special measures." This was [a school in Reading](#) in February 2014. The list of leadership and teaching failures in this school reported by the local newspaper is quite astounding. It was even reported that Inspectors found some pupils were 'regressing', but on the plus side opportunities for 'spiritual development' were being promoted well.

6) The Ofsted inspection at [Our Lady and St John Catholic College in Blackburn](#) found evidence of an increase in racist incidents, as well as a 'high number of incidents, including bullying' and homophobic language. The North Road school, housed in a new £10 million Building Schools for the Future campus, was found to be 'inadequate' on every count, with behaviour cited as a particular concern. Pupils said they felt the school's leaders did not do enough to promote cohesion and harmony, and the Inspectors' report found "relatively little evidence of students from different cultures and heritages mixing together".

7) In March 2014 it was reported that a primary school in Mole Valley was being put into special measures following a damning Ofsted report. [The Weald Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School](#) in Beare Green was labelled 'inadequate' and the school ordered to improve before another Ofsted inspection later that year. Three years before it had been rated it as 'good' and then Ofsted had noted: "The Christian ethos, which threads through all aspects of the school's work, is a strength and underpins the respectful and caring relationships between pupils and staff." Asked about its subsequent slide into special measures in spite of this all-pervasive Christian thread, the Reverend Barbara Steadman-Allen, one of the governors, helpfully told the *Surrey Advertiser*: "Individual comment from any governor would seem to serve little helpful community purpose."

8) In May 2014, teaching and leadership at [Ian Ramsey Church of England School](#) in Stockton was branded "inadequate" by Ofsted. The inspectors' report said teaching was "inadequate", with teachers' expectations too low, "particularly of the most able students". It also noted that "the progress of some students is hampered because behaviour is not consistently good in lessons. Students do not always display positive attitudes to learning." It also concluded that "Leaders and managers, including governors, have an over-optimistic view of how well the school is doing. They are not effective enough in checking on, or challenging, teachers."

9) Also in May 2014, a primary school in Willesden was put into special measures following an Ofsted report branding the quality of education as "inadequate" (clearly a favourite word in the Ofsted lexicon). [The standard of education in St Andrew and St Francis CofE Primary School](#), which was previously deemed good, had "plummeted to a new low". The inspectors accused the headteacher and governors of not having a realistic picture of the school and not enforcing an adequate standard of education. They also criticised the attainment of pupils, claiming few made good progress in reading and mathematics, with specific mention to a "weak" progress in writing, particularly for boys.

10) "Pupils' achievement is inadequate because too many do not make the progress of which they are capable, especially in writing. There are gaps in achievement between different groups of pupils. For example, disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are not given the specific extra help they need to make better progress." So said Ofsted about [St James Church of England School](#), a voluntary controlled junior school in Upton Street, Tredworth. It was criticised for not stretching pupils enough and not giving students enough time to do their work.

11) "Inspectors visited [Holy Trinity Church of England Primary in Middleton Road, Oswestry](#), in January for their third monitoring visit since the school was placed in special measures in February 2013. In her report, chief inspector Linda McGill, said: "Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time the school is not making enough progress towards the removal of special measures." However, the Inspectors also noted that "It is clear that the climate in school has changed for the better".

Since then, some of these schools have been rescued by the academy programme, while others made the progress needed to improve and escape the special measures opprobrium. I'll be checking on them all again later this year to see what the current situation is – after all, academisation is no guarantee against failure, and good performance really shouldn't be the subject of ebb and flow in any school.

The conclusions we can draw are clear enough. Most obvious is that a religious ethos in no way guarantees delivery of a successful learning and teaching environment for the community served by a faith school, contrary to what the Church of England and the Catholic Church would have you believe in their regular proclamations of faith school success stories. In schools with or without a religious ethos, failures will occur but as any parent will readily testify, the quality of teaching and school leadership are the most important in-school factors in a child's outcomes. In all these above examples, these were found to be just as lacking in faith schools as in any other kind of school, and in spite of the scale of administrative control and support given through the Anglican and Catholic diocese education frameworks.

Alistair McBay

Alistair McBay is the vice president of the National Secular Society and its spokesperson for Scotland. You can follow Alistair on Twitter [@AMcBay_NSS](#). The views expressed in our blogs are

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