

Cameron says he wants to "enhance faith-based education"

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The rush by local authorities in England to cut transport subsidies to faith schools has brought a reaction from the Prime Minister, David Cameron, who says he will consult with the Education Secretary to see what can be done to "enhance faith-based education".

The Prime Minister's comments came in response to a parliamentary question from Jim Dobbin, MP who said: "Since the Education Act 1944, successive Governments have supported subsidised travel for students who live three miles or more from the faith school of their choice. Some local authorities are beginning to cut back on that financial support, and I do not think any member of this House wants to see that happen. Can the Prime Minister encourage local authorities to embrace the spirit of the 1944 Act on this particular issue?"

Mr Cameron replied: "I support school choice — parents having the ability to choose between schools — and I also support faith schools. Indeed, I have chosen a faith school for my own children. So I will look very carefully at what he says and what local authorities are doing, discuss it with the Education Secretary and see what we can do to enhance not only choice, but the faith-based education that many of our constituents choose."

This is the latest shot in a campaign headed by churches to resist the cuts being made by councils.

In Rochdale, headteachers from all of the local Catholic schools have protested at the Council's plan to scrap free bus travel to pupils who live more than three miles from a faith school, except those coming from less well-off families.

A letter signed by all the borough's Catholic headteachers says:

"Most schools with a religious character draw children from a wider geographical area than other schools do. Consequently many students at schools with a religious character have further to travel to school, which means they have to rely on public transport to get there. Imposing charges on parents looking for education in Rochdale's Catholic and other faith schools deliberately constructs a barrier to the educational preference of many parents for their children. This proposal is an attack on parental choice.

"It would be a grave offence against natural justice to further penalise families and to discriminate against their right to choose a school for their children on economic grounds, particularly at this time of financial austerity."

Rochdale council needs to cut £54 million from its budget by next April. The council's plans — which are still under consideration — would save in the region of £250,000 a year.

Meanwhile in Middlesbrough the council has hosted public consultation meetings at which tempers flared among parents who will soon have to pay for their children's transport to religious schools. Middlesbrough Council has to save £38 million in the next four years and these proposed changes

would save it £350,000 over four years.

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: "The Government has imposed huge restrictions on local authority spending and many councils have been forced into making heartbreaking cuts to services for the old and disabled. But that seems to be of no consequence to the churches. These protests are selfish and, indeed, what some might describe as unChristian.

"While we all have to suffer during this period of austerity, it seems religious people imagine that they should be exempt from the pain. No-one is preventing their children receiving an education, and if they can't afford the bus to a school miles away, then they will have to go to a school nearer to their home. The law for England and Wales requires all schools to hold an act of Collective Worship, so they won't be deprived of religion.

"No child will be denied an education because of these cuts, but they may just save an old people's day centre or support services for people with learning disabilities."

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