

Ofsted report finds Al-Madinah school “dysfunctional”

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A damning Ofsted report has found the Al-Madinah Muslim free school in Derby to be "dysfunctional" and "inadequate" in all areas.

The report found the school was run by representatives of the community with limited knowledge and experience who had failed to ensure the safety of children, and had failed to appoint staff with appropriate skills, knowledge and experience.

Inspectors said they saw no evidence during the inspection of boys and girls being treated unequally, but "due to limited canteen space, boys and girls have their lunches separately".

The teaching was judged inadequate with the report blaming the staff's "low expectations" for pupils' low achievement.

However, the school was praised for its "clear vision for the purpose and place of this school in the community." It said "pupils' spiritual and moral development is well supported in and out of school".

The emphasis the school places on religion is made clear in the report.

Inspectors saw few opportunities for pupils to apply their literacy or numeracy skills when working in other subjects with the exception of Islamic studies, where pupils had good opportunities to develop their literacy.

In addition to Islamic studies, the school offers distinct religious education lessons, in which the locally agreed syllabus is followed, covering the six major world religions. The school was praised for taking pupils to visit a local Catholic school where pupils talked about their respective faiths and exchanged a copy of the Qur'an and set of rosary beads.

According to the report, pupils speak positively about the good relationships in the school and the lack of bullying, but "pupils sometimes use homophobic terms of abuse to each other" but are clear that adults would reprimand them if they were overheard.

Embarrassingly for the Government, the report says the school has not been adequately monitored or supported.

Last week, the National Secular Society pointed out that the schools prospectus openly states that anything deemed "sensitive, inaccurate and potentially blasphemous will be censored or removed completely" from school's teaching materials.

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager at the National Secular Society, said: "Right from the start we warned the Department for Education of the need to closely monitor free schools. The Department's *laissez-faire* approach to regulation, and its blind spot when it comes to 'faith schools', is denying pupils the opportunity to achieve their potential. At the same time, Michael Gove's ideological experiment is allowing religious groups to inculcate and indoctrinate children in any manner they choose. Children deserve much better from state funded education."

The Schools minister will decide on 1 November whether to terminate the school's funding agreement.

Meanwhile, trustees at Al-Madinah have written to all parents to make clear that the school has lifted its head covering requirement for female staff and pupils.

The letter was [posted on the school's website](#) as the Government's deadline for changes approached on Thursday 15 October.

Lord Nash, Schools Minister, wrote to Al-Madinah's governors last week with a catalogue of complaints about the school's non-compliance with the Department for Education's funding agreement. He had insisted that it immediately remove its requirement for female staff to wear head coverings, even if they were non-Muslims. In the letter, the Minister warned that it needed to address the "many and significant failings with regards to financial management" or risk being stripped of state funds.

The school was closed suddenly for three days after an Ofsted inspection raised alarms about the safety of pupils. It had found the police criminal records checks had not been carried out on some members of staff.

It was [revealed](#) that pupils spend hours each day on Koranic studies and praying and that girls are made to sit at the back of the classroom so that boys cannot look at them. No singing is permitted, except Islamic hymns, and no stringed instruments are allowed to be played. Fairy tales are also forbidden in the school.

The school's letter to parents read: "All members of staff employed by Al-Madinah school have been notified in writing that they are not required to cover their hair, if it is contrary to their religious and cultural beliefs and values.

"In addition we would like to remind you that children are not required nor compelled by the school to cover their hair and indeed, that this is a matter of choice."

In its letter to staff, the school trustees said that a handbook with these policies would be distributed in November. It said:

"Until recently, in keeping with our ethos as a faith-based school we believed that it was in the best interests of pupils at Al-Madinah school, their parents and the community and that female members of staff cover their hair.

"The Trust and the Governing Body now realise how this practice could be interpreted and perceived as treating female members of staff less favourably than male members of staff and impacting on the right to freedom of religious and cultural expression. The Trust and the Governing Body would like to make it clear that this was never the intention and would like to apologise for any situation where staff felt discriminated against on cultural, religious or gender grounds.

"With immediate effect the Trust and the Governing Body is notifying all employees of a change in policy, that female employees at Al-Madinah School are not required to cover their hair on school premises."

The Sunday Times reported this week that there were questions about a £95,000 payment that the school had made to an organisation that employ relatives of some of the Governors.

The papers said that "The sum is understood to have been paid by Al-Madinah school, which is funded by the taxpayer, to All Services Management Solutions (ASMS), a management services company, despite cheaper quotes from at least one other firm.

"Officials from the DfE are believed to have found evidence of more than £8,000 of duplicate payments made by Al-Madinah to a company that provides it with educational supplies, and that more than £11,000 was wrongly used to fund bids to set up a further three free schools in Nottingham, Birmingham and Bradford.

"While the school is understood to have denied any impropriety and pointed out that the two governors with relatives working at ASMS declared a potential conflict of interest and took no part in the decision to award the contract, the report's findings are likely to heap pressure on Gove to shut Al-Madinah."

The Sunday Times reported: "Al-Madinah is understood to have told DfE investigators that Shahban Rehmat, its director of facilities, and Javid Akhtar, a governor, revealed their links with employees at ASMS, whose work for the school includes providing cleaners and site managers, and did not take part in the decision to award the contract.

"Akhtar is also the director of Prestige HR Solutions, a firm that supplied Al-Madinah with human resource services at the cost of about £1,000 a month. He is chairman of the committee that oversees HR at the school. The contract was awarded before Akhtar joined the board of governors and the school is believed to have told DfE officials that neither he nor his company were known to governors or staff before the contract was awarded."

Meanwhile, a non-religious mother who sent her son to the school in the hope that it would relieve him from the bullying he had experienced at his previous school, has now withdrawn him from Al-Madinah, [telling the Daily Mail](#):

"I sent my son to the school because he had been badly bullied at his last school and I felt that a faith school would be a safe place to send him. But it felt as though the bullying was coming from the school, rather than other teenagers. He was discriminated against because he had no religion.

"At an awards night, I wanted to sit with my son and enjoy the evening. But he said: "No, mum, you can't the women aren't allowed to sit with the men" – and there was a big partition in the hall so I couldn't see him. I was stunned."

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