

Schools where face veils are a “barrier” to learning and social interaction to be marked down by Ofsted

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The head of Ofsted Sir Michael Wilshaw has announced that he is giving his "full support" to schools that "take a stand against the inappropriate wearing of the veil."

Ofsted announced that inspectors have now been instructed to "mark down institutions if they judge the wearing of the veil is acting as a barrier to learning and to positive social interaction."

In 2013 a college in Birmingham was forced to reverse a ban on face coverings after a student successfully campaigned to be able to wear a niqab on school premises. The Birmingham Metropolitan College had reportedly banned the niqab for security reasons.

Now Ofsted is committed to supporting schools and colleges which make the determination to ban face veils, and will go further by marking down schools in which face veils impede "positive social interaction."

Sir Michael said: "I am concerned that some heads and principals who are trying to restrict the wearing of the full veil in certain circumstances are coming under pressure from others to relax their policy. I want to assure these leaders that they can rely on my full backing for the stance they are taking."

He added: "The Prime Minister and Secretary of State are right to give their backing to schools and other institutions which insist on removing face coverings when it makes sense to do so."

Sir Michael said that inspectors should consider judging schools in which face veils negatively affect learning as inadequate.

"I have also made clear to my inspectors that where leaders are condoning the wearing of the face veil by staff members or by pupils when this is clearly hindering communication and effective teaching, they should give consideration to judging the school as inadequate," the Chief Inspector said.

"I am determined to ensure that discrimination, including on the grounds of gender, has no place in our classrooms. We want our schools, whether faith schools or non-faith schools, to prepare their pupils equally for life in 21st century Britain. We need to be confident our children's education and future prospects are not being harmed in any way."

The National Secular Society, which does not campaign for a general ban on face veils, welcomed Sir Michael's intervention but said it would like to see the Government be more robust in determining national guidelines.

Stephen Evans, National Secular Society campaigns manager, said: "Full face veils are obviously inappropriate in a classroom and inhibit communication between staff and pupils. There should be every expectation that pupils and staff can communicate and identify each-other easily in schools."

School dress codes will not generally permit face coverings to be worn and no concessions should be made to those who wish to cover their faces on religious grounds.

"Whilst we welcome Sir Michael's support of schools wishing to prohibit the full face veil, we would like to see the Government be more robust in setting the expectation that no face coverings should be worn in schools. The lack of central guidance places an unreasonable pressure on schools and puts headteachers and school governors in an unenviable position.

"The education secretary should recognise that the face veil is more than a piece of clothing. Its symbolic role and the way in which it makes an issue of female gender and sexuality means it should have no place in British schools.

"Face veils have the potential not only to hinder students' communicative abilities but also their integration within civil society. Such a prohibition in schools will also ensure that no young girls are compelled to wear the face veil."

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