

NSS: Religious Education must be reformed before ending parental opt-out

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Religious education must be reformed before parents lose the option to remove their children from the subject, the NSS has said, after head teachers voted to make RE compulsory.

Concerns about some parents withdrawing their children from lessons about other religions prompted headteachers to vote at their annual conference in favour of ending the opt-out which currently allows children to be withdrawn from RE classes.

Stephen Evans, National Secular Society campaigns director, said that whilst he agreed in principle that parents shouldn't be allowed to pick and choose what subjects their children learn in school, the "unique, outdated and wholly unsatisfactory arrangements" for RE mean that the current opt-out is necessary to protect religious freedom.

The motion against the parental opt-out was passed "almost unanimously", the [Telegraph](#) reported, and it asks the leadership of the NAHT "to negotiate with the Department for Education to revoke the existing legal framework which entitles parents to be able to withdraw their children from Religious Education".

All state-funded schools are currently required by law to teach religious education. Maintained schools without a religious character must follow a syllabus agreed by local committees, often heavily influenced by religious groups.

Schools with a religious character, commonly known as 'faith schools', can teach their own curriculum and are free to teach exclusively about their own religion.

But head teachers warned that the opt-out was an "extremely divisive mechanism" as some parents were using it selectively to stop their children from learning about specific religions.

Mr Evans added: "There may well be a place on the curriculum for an academic subject that enables all pupils to learn objectively about the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews, but we're a long way off that at the moment – with many schools prioritising a particular religion and using the subject as a platform to proselytise.

"There needs to be a thorough review of RE so that it can be reformed as a subject and taught impartially before the opt-out can be ended.

"Faith schools should lose the ability to teach about religion from their own exclusive viewpoint, RE should be comprehensively reformed into a new academic subject that covers a variety of religious and non-religious worldviews, and religious representatives should not have undue influence over the subject content.

"Until this is done and all vestiges of confessionalism are removed, we'll campaign to keep the opt-out to ensure parental rights and pupils' religious freedoms are protected."

[The Government has said](#) that it will "continue to respect the right of parents to withdraw their children from religious education if they choose."

In [2012 it was reported that schools in Scotland](#) were failing to notify parents that they had a right to withdraw their children from religious education. A YouGov poll found that only 20% said they were made aware of this right by the school.

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