

LibDems back phasing out religious discrimination in school admissions

Posted: Mon, 20th Mar 2017

The LibDems have backed a series of reforms to the role of religion in the UK education system, in a [motion](#) approved at the Party's Spring Conference.

The Liberal Democrats' Spring Conference backed a statement calling for an end to religious discrimination in school admissions, and calling for the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in Religious Education (RE).

Councillor Lucy Nethsingha moved the motion, which acknowledged the historic role of religious organisations in increasing access to education but stated that "religious instruction should not be funded by the state."

The conference expressed its view that "selection in admissions on the basis of religion or belief to state-funded schools" should be phased out over the next six years.

The Government's policy of allowing new faith-based free schools to discriminate on religious grounds in all of their admissions has received cross-party condemnation, and the National Secular Society welcomed the Lib Dems' statement as a "clear sign that the Party will oppose religious discrimination."

The conference expressed its concern about the negative impact of faith schools on integration, and said that "children of different racial, religious, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds should be able to benefit from mixing together from an early age."

The motion said that the "segregation of school children" by religion is a "contributory factor or cause of communities failing to integrate or growing apart."

Toby Keynes, chair of Humanist & Secularist Liberal Democrats, called the vote a "terrific result" and said it was "clear that Liberal Democrat members have become far less willing to accept at face value the arguments that are put up in defence of faith-based selection."

In addition to tackling discrimination against pupils and their families, the conference called for new protection for staff employed in faith schools. It said teachers should be "employed only on the basis of merit" with no exemption to allow consideration of candidate's religious beliefs unless the staff are responsible for providing "religious instruction".

A "new approach" is needed to the role of religion in the state-funded education system, the conference said, and clear lines should be drawn between RE and "religious instruction".

RE should incorporate "all the major religious and non-religious viewpoints" and Ofsted should include the subject in its inspections. Currently RE is inspected by individuals appointed by school governing bodies in consultation with local religious leaders.

The current requirement to hold acts of collective worship should be repealed, the conference said, but any voluntary act of worship held by a school should be "optional" for staff and pupils, and there should be "meaningful alternative activities".

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