

Sex education reforms: faith schools to keep special exemptions

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The National Secular Society has welcomed moves to make sex and relationship education statutory, but urged the Government to rethink *de facto* exemptions for faith schools.

Justine Greening, the Secretary of State for Education, has announced the Government's intention to give a statutory basis for sex and relationships education (SRE) and provide for "age appropriate provision" of SRE in all primary and secondary schools in England.

However, the Government said it was taking an approach that would be "sensitive to the needs of the local community."

Stephen Evans, the campaigns director of the National Secular Society, said: "This sounds like children from minority faith groups will be totally left behind by the Government's proposals. Under this approach, children who happen to be born into conservative religious groups will still be without proper sex and relationships education."

The NSS has been lobbying Justine Greening to make sex and relationship education statutory in all schools, including those with faith-based ethos.

In a written statement Justine Greening said that "faith schools will continue to be able to teach in accordance with the tenets of their faith".

The Government has also made clear that parents "will continue to have a right to withdraw their children from sex education."

The Secretary of State also said that schools will have "flexibility" over the delivery of SRE and how it is taught. In [2015](#) the NSS reported on how some faith schools had blocked an NHS Community Education Sexual Health team after pressure from their religious governors. The NSS has also raised other [concerns](#) about teaching of SRE within a faith ethos.

Mr Evans continued: "Whilst we welcome news that SRE is to be made compulsory, the proposed wriggle room for faith schools needs to be reconsidered. All children, irrespective of their religious or cultural background or the type of school they attend, deserve the same protection from harm that balanced and accurate SRE offers.

"Given the vital importance of good quality SRE to the lives and of children and young people, the special arrangements for faith schools serve as an example of how religion's role in state education is impeding children's independent rights and interests. The school curriculum should serve the needs of pupils, not education providers."

Mr Evans said the NSS would also be pressing for the parental opt-out to be removed:

"Allowing parents to withdraw young people from sex education lessons also undermines the right of the child. Given that many of those exercising the right of withdrawal, often on religious grounds, may not be providing this information at home, it is vital that faith schools teach the same SRE as

other schools. Anything less would be a betrayal of the pupils attending religious schools, often through no choice of their own."

The Department for Education has promise a "comprehensive programme of engagement to set out age-appropriate subject content and identify the support schools need to deliver high-quality teaching."

The move has been [welcomed](#) by the Sex Education Forum – of which the NSS is a member – and follows a number of [amendments](#) related to SRE being tabled for the Report Stage of the Children and Social Work Bill. The Government has also been under [pressure](#) with a slew of reports from Parliamentary committees, and the UN's children's rights committee [calling](#) on them to act.

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