

Ofsted head criticises segregation as Islamic school is taken over

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The chief inspector of the schools inspectorate Ofsted has spoken out against gender segregation in mixed-sex schools.

Amanda Spielman's words came as she announced that an Islamic school at the centre of a segregation row would be taken over by an independent academy trust.

"I am deeply concerned about the idea that total segregation of children within a mixed school is acceptable," Spielman said.

"Segregating boys and girls in a mixed school feels as though it is depriving both boys and girls of a big part of the benefits of a school.

"We have single-sex schools and I am not challenging that. But the idea that you have... a mixed school and yet you do not have social development, stimulation, all the things that come from mixing the sexes, makes me uncomfortable."

This weekend Spielman announced that the Al-Hijrah school in Birmingham would find new management on the Department for Education's orders. The decision follows the publication of an Ofsted report which rated the school as "inadequate" – the worst possible ranking.

Al-Hijrah, which has around 750 pupils, was one of England's first state-funded Muslim schools. The school originally opened in Birmingham Central Mosque in 1998 to address the "problem" of Muslim children "not receiving a satisfactory standard of instruction in Islamic moral and religious matters" in state schools. In 2001 the school ceased being a private school and became a publicly funded voluntary-aided faith school within the state sector.

Boys and girls there are segregated throughout the day from the age of nine to 16.

Last year Ofsted inspectors visited the school and raised concerns about many leadership failings, including "too heavy involvement" by governors in the day-to-day running of the school, and concerns over gender segregation. They said the school had an unchallenged culture of discrimination against girls and LGBT people.

They also found religious books promoting rape, violence against women and misogynistic attitudes in the school library. Among them were books stating that a husband can beat his wife and insist on having sex with her. Some girls anonymously complained that gender segregation was hindering their ability to integrate into wider society.

In November a judge ruled that Ofsted had been wrong to punish the school for segregating its pupils, on the grounds that the children were "separated equally".

Last week the High Court heard an Ofsted appeal against that decision. The court has yet to deliver its verdict. If Ofsted wins, it will re-inspect up to 20 faith schools that teach boys and girls separately and could force them to change their arrangements.

Spielman said she decided to appeal because the case raised "a really important point of principle".

"What pupils were missing out on in Al-Hijrah was the chance to interact with the opposite sex, to prepare them for adult life."

The National Secular Society urged Ofsted to appeal the original ruling. The NSS also supported interventions by two women's groups, Southall Black Sisters and Inspire, which highlighted the role that Islamist ideology was playing at the schools.

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