

Single-religion schools and compulsory worship banned, South African court rules

Posted: Tue, 4th Jul 2017

Schools may not teach one religion at the expense of others or hold compulsory religious observances, a court in South Africa has ruled.

The Johannesburg High Court declared last week that six predominantly Christian schools had illegally promoted one religion and excluded others.

Judge Willem van der Linde said religious observances may be conducted at state or state-aided voluntary institutions. But he added that they must be held on an equitable basis and that attendance must be optional.

"Neither a school governing body nor a public school may lawfully hold out that it subscribes to only a single particular religion to the exclusion of others," he said.

The court was responding to an application by the Organisation for Religious Education and Democracy (OGOD) for a restraining order to prevent the schools from taking part in 71 instances of religious conduct. Although it did not grant the order, the court ruled that the schools had breached the Schools Act.

"The overarching constitutional theme is that our society is diverse, diversity is to be celebrated and specific rights are conferred and dealt with in pursuance of that principle," the judgement read. "Public schools are public assets which serve the interests of society as a whole."

South Africa's national department of education said the ruling was consistent with its own policies. "The aim is not to ban religious practices in schools, but about protecting children and emphasising that schools should engage in religion education rather than religious instruction and not promote one religion over another," a spokesperson said.

The ruling was welcomed by the South African [Human Rights Commission](#) and many representatives of faith organisations.

South African Muslim Network chairperson, Dr Faisal Suliman, said fostering a culture of inclusion should be a "natural, human inclination". "We are trying to build social cohesion. How do we do that? We try to understand each other: it starts here, at our schools. This will go a long way in eradicating extremism too."

The Reverend Ian Booth, chairperson for the Diakonia Council of Churches, also backed the ruling, saying "it was not the responsibility of schools to teach children about their faith".

"This is for places of worship to do. We would support this judgment as it is in keeping with our constitution", he said.

Stephen Evans, National Secular Society (UK) campaigns director, welcomed the verdict.

"The court has rightly reaffirmed the principle that schools should not indoctrinate children in one particular religion. Governments in many other countries, including the UK, should take note.

"But there is still room to go further than this ruling and undertake root-and-branch reform to the religious character of many schools. The whole concept of sectarian, faith-based education needs a rethink."

The National Secular Society argues that all schools should be inclusive and equally open to children from a range of backgrounds. In the UK, the NSS campaigns for the phasing out faith schools, an end to religiously discriminatory admissions, an end to the legal requirement on schools to hold acts of collective worship and reform of religious education.

- [Share on What's App](#)
- [Share on Facebook](#)
- [Share on Twitter](#)
- [Share on Email](#)
- [Subscribe to RSS Feed](#)