

Pressure on DfE to issue guidance on hijabs and fasting in schools

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The chair of governors at a highly-performing primary school has called on the Government to issue guidance to help enforce standards on the Islamic headscarf and fasting.

Arif Qawi, chair of governors at St Stephen's in Upton Park, east London, [said](#) the Department for Education should "step up and take it out of our hands".

Mr Qawi said the school had faced a "backlash" from some parents after banning girls under the age of eight from wearing the hijab in school and encouraging children not to fast on school premises. He said he found it "unfair" that the Government had left uniform policy to individual head teachers and their governing bodies.

His words echo a request from the National Secular Society in September. In a [letter](#) to the then Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening, the NSS urged the Government to issue guidance making clear the Government would support schools which choose not to incorporate the hijab into their uniform codes.

"The guidance should also make clear that the freedom to make accommodations to allow the wearing of the hijab does not extend to primary schools," the letter said.

"Given the 'justifications' that lie behind so called 'modesty' codes, and its implicit sexualisation of children, we regard it as a matter of deep regret that so many schools are facilitating young girls being dressed in the hijab.

"Education policy should empower girls and help them to make their own decisions once they are ready to do so. Whilst policies permitted the wearing of the hijab are so often framed in terms of choice and freedom, we urge you to recognise that this 'freedom' is often dictated by social pressure."

It also said the Government should prevent schools from forcing girls to wear hijabs. Last year NSS research [found](#) that 42% of Islamic schools, including 27 primary schools, have uniform policies requiring girls to wear the hijab.

St Stephen's [topped](#) the *Sunday Times* Parent Power school league tables last year, leading the paper to describe it as "the country's best state primary school" yesterday.

Neena Lall, the head teacher, said the school had made the changes to help pupils integrate into modern British society. "A couple of years ago I asked the children to put their hands up if they thought they were British," she said. "Very few children put their hands up."

Mr Qawi said the school had not banned fasting altogether, but had "encouraged them [children] to fast in holidays, at weekends and not on the school campus". Some parents expected their children to fast during Ramadan.

He said it was "common sense" that the Government should "take it out of our hands and tell every school this is how it should be".

"Here we are responsible for their health and safety if they pass out on campus. It is not fair to us.

"The same for the hijab. It should not be our decision. It is unfair to teachers and very unfair to governors. We are unpaid. Why should we get the backlash?"

He said some parents were "pleased" that the school had taken a stand.

Stephen Evans, the NSS's chief executive, welcomed the call for guidance on both the hijab and fasting.

"Mr Qawi is right to say teachers and governors should not be left to their own devices to resist fundamentalist pressure. Without unambiguous support many will end up giving far too much ground to those who wish to impose modesty codes on children, including at alarmingly young ages.

"Most importantly the Government must stand for children's ability to grow up in an egalitarian and free society. Schools which promote gender equality need support. Schools which promote children's freedom to make their own minds up about religion when they are old enough need support."

The Department for Education told the *Sunday Times*: "It is a matter for individual schools to decide how to accommodate children observing Ramadan, and to set uniform policies. We issue clear guidance on uniform and to help schools understand their legal duties under the Equality Act."

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