

Transport to faith schools: Local authorities shouldn't be subsidising religious segregation

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A "hideous form of discrimination" or the justifiable removal of a religious privilege? NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans takes on Conservative MP Nigel Evans over the removal of transport subsidies to faith schools.

Last week, during Education Questions in the House of Commons, the Conservative MP Nigel Evans [raised](#) what he described as a "hideous form of discrimination" concerning faith schools.

He wasn't objecting to some publicly funded schools discriminating against pupils in admissions on the basis of their parents' beliefs or religious activities. Nor to some such schools refusing to employ teachers that can't prove their piety.

No, instead he singled out as a "hideous form of discrimination" some local authorities exercising their discretion not to spend public money transporting children to faith schools when other suitable schools are available closer to home.

The law already requires local authorities to make arrangements for pupils from low income backgrounds to attend the nearest school preferred on grounds of religion or belief, where that school is between two and 15 miles from their home.

However, for many years, local authorities have been more than generous, and where parents have chosen to send their child to a faith school rather than the nearest available school, local authorities have provided free or subsidised transport on a "discretionary" basis to all pupils.

Families wishing to send their children to schools further afield that specialise in other areas, such as sport, mathematics, drama, science, art or technology have to meet the total cost of transport themselves. Only parents choosing a school on the basis of religion receive special treatment.

The costs are considerable - in the tens of millions of pounds when surveyed some years ago. In recent years a number of local authorities have decided they can no longer afford this, and must instead prioritise protecting services that look after the most vulnerable members of society.

One such council is Lancashire, home to Nigel Evans' constituency of Ribble Valley where the Council currently spends £8.5 million on providing home to school transport. About half of that sum is spent on 'discretionary' provision - primarily paying for pupils to attend a Church of England or Roman Catholic faith school which is not their nearest school.

Despite having to slash public services to find £3.5m savings over two years, Lancashire Council has rather generously agreed to continue subsidising the cost, but has said that it will in future ask parents to pay a greater contribution to the costs associated with transporting their children to religious schools.

But that's not good enough for some parents. They are up in arms, and have prompted their MP to start lobbying to ensure that the taxpayer picks up the bill for their children's bus passes. In a well-crafted piece of Orwellian doublespeak, Evans has launched a [campaign](#) to 'stop the discrimination'.

With the Government providing the funds for faith schools and politicians constantly waxing lyrical about the 'importance of faith', it is hardly surprising that parents have come to believe they have some sort of 'right' to send their child to a religious school at the state's expense.

No such right exists.

Under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), there is no specific right to have your children educated at a faith school. Yes, local authorities need to respect parents' religious and philosophical convictions as to the education to be provided for their children, but that's not the same as the state having to provide a faith-based education. It does not and it should not. This has simply become an unreasonable - and potentially divisive - parental demand that no politician seems prepared to challenge.

What is perfectly reasonable is for parents of all faiths and none to expect a state education that doesn't run completely counter to their beliefs. Therefore, if the nearest state school with available places is, let's say, a Sikh faith school, non-Sikhs shouldn't be expected to send their child there, or be penalised in any way for not doing so.

The same applies to every religion and belief combination you can come up with. Therefore, if the nearest appropriate school that doesn't run counter to a parent's beliefs is further away, then it seems fair that the state should pick up the bill for having to travel further for an appropriate school.

This is yet another reason why it would be better all round for the state to ensure that all publicly-funded schools are strictly neutral when it comes to matters of religion. The schools we all share should be inclusive and secular - where all beliefs are respected, but none are actively promoted. Parents that want to give their child a religious upbringing are at liberty to do so (via the home and wherever they worship), but it's not a reasonable demand of state education.

As councils up and down the country have realised that discretionary spending on transport to faith schools is no longer affordable, we've seen all sorts of distorted rhetoric concerning the cutbacks. Catholic activist Lord Alton suggested expecting parents to pay for their choice was a "[faith tax](#)". Conservative Assembly Member for South Wales Suzy Davies even [claimed](#) that by not providing free transport to faith schools local authorities "could be denying a child's right to manifest a religion".

This is nonsense. Not providing free buses to faith schools in no way interferes with anyone's right to manifest a religion. In fact, it's the provision of free transport to those choosing schools on the basis of their religious convictions that introduces the disadvantage.

Take for example the [situation in Flintshire](#) where only children who can "prove" their religion qualify for free school buses, whilst those who can't have to pay their own way - and may not even be allowed on the 'Catholic' bus. This means children who live next door to each other, and travel to the same school, can be treated unequally, purely on the basis of their parents' religious beliefs.

You might have thought that anti-discrimination laws would have put paid to this - but Equality Act exemptions mean local authorities can't be touched for applying such discriminatory policies.

During its [scrutiny](#) of the legislation, the Joint Committee on Human Rights expressed concern that "maintaining this exemption from the Equality Act duty may encourage local authorities to continue to treat those with religious and those with non-religious beliefs differently in the provision of school transport."

The Committee concluded: "In our view, the Government has not demonstrated the necessity for this exception from the prohibition on discrimination on grounds of religion or belief for school transport."

Nevertheless, the exemption remains and in some areas, religious families continue to receive more favourable treatment.

Where discretionary free transport to faith schools has been phased out it has simply resulted in parents and pupils being treated equally by their local councils. Only someone who thinks being religious should bring with it entitlement to civil privileges could possibly describe this as a "hideous form of discrimination".

But what's even more worrying is that the Education Secretary Nicky Morgan told Parliament that she understood the parents' frustrations and "will perhaps look at this again".

Rather than further entrenching religious privilege in education, Nicky Morgan should be stressing the importance of local authorities avoiding discrimination in the provision of transport and insisting upon equitable policies, free from religious favouritism, fair for families and taxpayers alike.

The Government may not have the courage or even the conviction to question the wisdom of faith schools, but it certainly shouldn't be entertaining the idea of dictating to local authorities that they must subsidise religious segregation in the form of free transport to faith schools.

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