

**SOME KEY ISSUES FROM THE N S S
FOR NUT CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE
ON FAITH SCHOOLS, 23 NOVEMBER 2007**

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Introduction

We believe teaching unions have a major role to play in influencing the Government and informing wider debate on the important topic of faith schools. We have been impressed by the amount and quality of work invested by the NUT in this area. We welcome the opportunity to participate in the conference and to hope to continue to co-operate with the union in this sphere in future.

The Society has been opposing publicly funded faith schools since its inception well over 100 years ago. The basis then, still valid today, is the objection in principle to proselytisation – call it inculcation if you wish – of religious doctrine at taxpayers' expense. These objections have become more strongly held with the classification of faith (or as we would call them, religious) schools in 1998, and the steady growth since then of religious schools. Now there is substantial growth impending of both Christian and minority faith schools.

But new concerns are even more pressing, in summary:

- a. **Religious schools cherry picking the most aspirant pupils**, disadvantaging struggling community schools. Interviews may be banned but religious schools' ability to insist on a "vicar's certificate" is equivalent to a life-long interview. Recent research of London schools by Dr Rebecca Allen of the Institute of Education and Anne West of the LSE presented to British Educational Research Association's Annual Conference shows conclusively faith schools "also cater, in the main, for pupils who are from more affluent backgrounds and with higher levels of prior attainment than pupils in non-religious schools". The churches are now trying furiously to muddy the water with anecdotal claims and surveys asking questions elicited to counter these self-evident facts. At a conference called Social Sorting and Education at London's City Hall in October, the NSS pointed to the growing hard evidence of cherry-picking by "faith schools" made possible by their privileged selection criteria, and the huge disadvantage at which community schools were consequently placed relative to them. We had expected a torrent of disagreement from delegates, but there was only a weary acceptance and sense of helplessness about it.
- b. **Religious schools, the myth of their success**. They do have on average better exam results. However especially where religious schools are not oversubscribed, and thus unable to exploit to the full the discriminatory entry criteria they alone can impose, such schools are often average or below – and some are even in special measures. A report by Dr Schagen presented to the Institute of Education shows the value added by religious schools (better outputs from more gifted pupils) to be no superior to community schools. All this suggests that it isn't the much-vaunted religious ethos which is the ingredient of success, but selection and class. Selection, in effect of aspirant parents, is the essence that David Blunkett wanted to bottle, whether he knew it or not. There are a limited number of them and it is naïve to think that opening more religious schools creates more such parents.

- c. **Should we have more Religious schools because they are popular?** They are popular with those who benefit from them (or hope to), because they get quasi private schools without paying the fees. But they are not popular with the population as a whole, the majority of whom, according to numerous surveys, think the idea of splitting children by religion at school is not a good idea.
- d. **Minority religious schools.** These are even more unpopular with the public and these schools are perhaps the most concerning area for the future. While we can understand the frustration for minority communities at the large and growing number of Christian schools, this is not a justification for minority faith schools. We have huge concerns about the adverse social cohesion implications of such schools. It seems to be the Government calling for the schools, and clerics rather than the minority community at large. Many of those from minority religious communities are already estranged from mainstream society; for them to attend separate schools intensifies this isolation. South Bank University has published a survey showing that integration works only if it is of pupils of all races and religions/beliefs starting no later than primary school stage. The complete opposite will happen with new minority faith schools. Well-integrated pupils will leave existing schools to attend them, reducing cohesion in both types of schools. The Government refuses even to acknowledge the problem, yet its direct intervention will lead directly in some areas to educational apartheid in the longer term. Yet there are no quotas for other faith pupils at such schools, and none would be enforced. Imagine requiring non-Muslim children to attend a Muslim school with compulsory veil uniform policy. There are also major concerns about sex-specific curricula, men not teaching girls, excessive time spent on religious studies, religious input into science, and problems over art, music and PE. We are convinced that the opening of such schools will eventually lead to an erosion of traditional norms in existing maintained schools. Can one imagine the fate of a gay child in such a school?
- e. **Non-religious pupils and staff are disadvantaged by religious schools. Every religious privilege creates victims.** Church attendance has been in decline for 60 years and only 1 in 14 of the population is in church on an average Sunday. The majority of the population are either non-religious or non-practising. The more schools become religious, the more the non-religious are being discriminated against. Non-religious teachers will find it increasingly difficult to obtain jobs in religious schools unless they pretend to be religious. It will increasingly be piety (or purported piety) that can land the job, rather than being the best candidate. Recent legislative changes have made this situation worse. Children from non-religious families are already and will increasingly be unable to gain access to their local school, unless their parents feign belief to be admitted to a publicly funded religious school and attend church, doubtless contributing to the collection.

But let's think of a few actions:

1. **Employment in faith schools:**

- a. There is already a shortage of "teachers of the faith" in faith schools, especially heads and senior teachers. Expansion will aggravate the shortage: fewer believers in the population = fewer teachers of required faith, so believers will have better choice of jobs and promotion chances.
- b. Conversely, expansion of faith schools increases the number of schools in which non-believers will suffer discrimination, as allowed by law (School Standards and Framework Act 1998 as modified by Employment Regulations 2003 and now Education and Inspections Act 2006). The NSS blew the whistle on Section 37 of this Act (provoking debates in both Houses but was unable to prevent Section 37 becoming law) which now permits discrimination against the non-religious head teachers of Voluntary Controlled schools, and some non-religious non-teaching staff, mainly teaching assistants, in Voluntary Aided schools.
- c. The change regarding head teachers is especially troubling because it will, in future, even be possible to refuse to appoint the best candidate because:

- i. of their (lack of) religious faith
- ii. of their not attending church sufficiently often
- iii. of their not being able to teach RE
- iv. of their relationships or conduct out of school hours being thought to fall short of religious teachings.
- v. It will be easy for a head teacher with strong religious commitment to give preference to similarly-minded candidates. This change therefore has the potential to damage the career prospects of all non-religious teachers in VC "faith schools". We acknowledge that the law does not require these religious criteria to be adopted, it merely now permits them to be applied, but we fear that the criteria will be applied routinely.

ACTION: Raise awareness of unfairness of Section 37. Remind employers robustly that they are not required to discriminate by the change of law and it is only fair for the best candidate to get the job. Ensure no one is dissuaded from applying for jobs because of these provisions.

2. **Oppose new faith schools. ACTION: Seek to build at both local and national level an effective network and support to help colleagues oppose new faith schools, or conversions to faith schools, partly from the perspective of them protecting their jobs, but also to maintain pupil choice.** In London an LSE survey showed 20% of secondary places were religious (and many more are planned), but only 8% attend church on an average Sunday. The Government pretends new religious schools are only to be opened in response to local demand. In practice, most are opened without fair consultation, some even in the face of majority opposition. Some are even built because of undue Government pressure on local authorities.
3. **Collective worship.** The NSS pressed successfully for amendments to the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to allow sixth-formers to withdraw from compulsory acts of worship. **ACTION: Please ensure that pupils are being made aware of the change, and of their new rights. Please campaign to have the exemption lowered to 15 and to include RE.**
4. **School Transport.** The society has pressed for the extension on Human Rights grounds of "denominational transport" to non-religious pupils. This is for them to attend a more distant community school if their parents do not wish them to attend the local faith school to which they were allocated. **ACTION: Please ensure that your LEA advertise this facility with the same prominence as they do any denominational transport arrangements.**
5. **General**
Read detailed information about the above, and new material as it is published by visiting our generic page
www.secularism.org.uk/schools.html
This is a major resource which we hope you will use.