

The choice delusion: how faith schools restrict school choice

What's the problem?

Faith schools are often justified in terms of choice. But three in ten families live in areas of high or extreme restriction on non-faith primary schools. Many families struggle to find a suitable local school, either having no option but a faith school or facing religiously discriminatory admissions. Choice based narratives also mischaracterises the challenges facing families and public education's role in a diverse society.

Though this issue is a problem across all four UK nations, the different ways in which data on schools and admissions are recorded mean that the methodology for the figures below can only be used for England.

2021

In 2021 we launched the local authority scorecard featuring analysis of almost half a million postcodes, along with the latest admissions data, providing an unprecedented new level of detail. For the first time, policymakers and the public can see how faith schools restrict choice in every local authority.

- **30% have little or no choice but a faith-based primary school**
In each of the three worst performing authorities by this measure, more than four in five families live in areas of high or extreme restriction.
- **10% have little or no choice but a faith-based secondary school**
In each of the three worst performing authorities by this measure, more than six in ten families live in areas of high or extreme restriction.
- **20,792 pupils assigned faith schools against preferences**
In the worst performing local authorities by this measure, over 1,000 pupils, or more than one in ten are affected.
- [2021 Local authority scorecard](#) (Document, 1.1 Mb)

Download the local authority scorecard to explore the impact of faith schools restricting choice in your area, compare these to national figures and the overall performance of other local authorities.

- [The Choice Delusion 2021 \(Local Authority Scorecard\) Briefing](#) (PDF, 252 Kb)

Download and share a two-page briefing covering the problem and what can be done.

- [Locked in and locked out: how faith schools restrict families' choices](#)

State funding of faith schools means many families are left without suitable schools. The narrative that faith schools are justified on the grounds of choice should be confronted.

- [Individual local authority scorecards](#)

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2020

The [figures for September 2020](#) showed:

- 20,340 assigned faith school despite non-faith preference (8,821 primary | 11,519 secondary).

Between September 2014 and 2020, [132,216 pupils](#) were assigned faith schools despite a non-faith preference.

2019

The 2018 report contained figures for the number of children assigned faith schools against their wishes in September [2017](#) and 2018. The updated [figures for September 2019](#) showed a further rise.

- 20,644 assigned faith school despite non-faith preference (8,333 primary | 12,311 secondary).

2018

In 2018 we published a ground-breaking report which examined the actual primary school choices available across England, and within rural areas specifically. It also analysed school admission data and other school preference research to quantify how these effects impact school choice.

- **Almost three in ten families across England live in areas where most or all of the closest primary schools are faith schools.** There is significant regional variation and the problem is more prevalent in rural areas. However, even in urban areas around one in four families live in areas with high or extreme restrictions.
- **Every year between 45,000 – 60,000 families apply for primary schools in areas with extreme restrictions on non-faith school choice**, with a further 111,000 – 136,000 in areas of high restriction.
- **In 43.4% of rural areas restrictions on non-faith school choice are categorised as "high" or "extreme".** In fact, 53% of rural primary schools are faith-based.
- **20.6% (7,727) of those who missed out on their first choice of a non-faith primary school in September 2018 were assigned a faith school.**

This includes 1,398 people who had made all their preferences (typically five) for a non-faith school.

- When parents appeal against the allocation of a faith school, there is no guarantee they will succeed – effectively forcing children into faith schools against their parents' wishes.
- [Read the full 2018 report](#)

The choice delusion: how faith schools restrict primary school choice in England

[Read More](#)

- [Unravelling the choice delusion](#)

We often hear that faith schools improve choice. But an NSS report shows that choice centred narratives mischaracterise the challenges facing families and public education's role in a diverse society.

Printed copies of the report are available on [request](#).

What can be done?

The absolute best way to address these problems is transitioning to a fully inclusive, secular (i.e., community-ethos) school system which provides a suitable education for all pupils irrespective of religion or belief.

In the meantime, a range of other measures are consistent with a wide range of positions, from those who wish to move entirely away from faith-based schooling to those focussed on mitigating inequities:

1. The Department for Education should monitor faith-based restrictions on school choice and suitability across England. New school plans should focus on addressing these.
2. There should be a legal entitlement for all families to have reasonable access to a non-faith (community-ethos) school.
3. Local authorities' duty to ensure adequate school provision should include monitoring faith-based restrictions on school choice and suitability, and prioritising addressing these in decisions about amalgamations or new provision.
4. Faith-based discrimination in admissions should be phased out, starting in areas of significant restrictions on school choice.
5. A moratorium should be introduced on the opening of new faith schools. This could be phased in starting in the areas with the highest faith-based restrictions on school choice and

suitability.

6. It should be made easier for faith schools to lose or downgrade their religious ethos, particularly in areas where they are contributing to high faith-based restrictions on school choice or are significantly unrepresentative of their local communities.

[Three in ten families across England live in areas where most or all of the closest primary schools are faith schools, and tens of thousands a year are assigned faith schools against their preferences.](#)

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[Are your family locked out of a local school because of religious discrimination, or locked into a faith school because there are no other options?](#)

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Are faith schools restricting your options?

Are you locked out of your local school based on religion? Have you been assigned a faith school against your wishes? Are faith schools your only option?

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Is a faith school your only option?

Are you locked out of your local school based on religion? Have you been assigned a faith school against your wishes? Are faith schools your only option?

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Contact email address*: _____

Postcode: _____

This can be yours or that of the nearest school.

Details*:

Tell us more about your situation.

Is this an current/active situation you need support with?

Yes No

Would you like to receive Newsline – our free weekly roundup of news and opinion?

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Parents' perspectives

Sarah, from TUNBRIDGE WELLS

"As an atheist, my children are automatically not eligible for a great number of local schools in my area because I refuse to attend church to get them in. I am paying for these schools as a taxpayer but am not allowed to benefit from them."

Kirsty, from SUTTON

"Over subscription in our area means the catchment area for us is tiny. We have a Catholic school and a C of E school, both of which require additional forms signed off by priest or vicar and church to confirm your attendance. The school we got for our child is a 40-minute walk from our house, so we have to drive every day."

"Although it's a wonderful infant school, it feeds into a C of E junior school which for the sake of my son and the friendships he has made I will send him to. I feel I have no choice and I can't believe more parents aren't outraged that our taxes majority fund a school that actively discriminates against our children based on religion. Our local Catholic school has 13 levels of entry. These were Catholic looked after children from local parish, siblings of children in the school, other children from parish. It then went through these three groups but anywhere in borough, any Christian children, any other religion and at the very bottom non-religious children."

Peter, from SALISBURY

"I had never looked into the rules of faith schools and admissions before. Now that I am expecting a baby soon, I have searched locally - I am shocked to discover that unbiased education free from religious dogma is not an option."

- [More parents' perspectives](#)

A selection of parents' perspectives on the issues in our report, and how faith schools restrict their choices.

[Read More](#)
