

What's the problem?

Faith schools are often justified in terms of choice. But many families struggle to find a suitable local school, either having no option but a faith school or facing religiously discriminatory admissions.

But three in ten families live in areas of high or extreme restriction on non-faith primary schools. 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.

2019-20

Between September 2014 and 2020, 132,216 pupils were assigned faith schools despite a non-faith preference.

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.

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).

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

[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 46.6% 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](#)

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

[What can be done?](#)

The best way to address these problems is a fully inclusive, secular (i.e., community-ethos) school system which provides a suitable education for all pupils. 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 focused 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.

More information

- [Campaign Briefing](#) (PDF, 291 Kb)

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

- [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.

- [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](#)

[Read More](#)

- [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.

[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?

* Required Field

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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?

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Supporter comments

"I'm a Christian but I believe faith schools cause big problems in society. They cause segregation and reduce school choice for parents. It is so much better for all children to learn together, mixing with all the children in their community. It is wrong that children are turned away from a school or prioritised for entry based on what their parents happen to do on a Sunday! I know a number of people who've told me they faked faith to get a school place, and I know one rather corrupt C of E primary school that helps out children who fail the 11-plus with their secondary application, so they go to a faith school not a regular high school. These sorts of problems are avoided by having all schools open to all local pupils."

Joanne, from CANTERBURY

My eldest just started Year 3 and has already chosen her secondary school, which is a local, but unfortunately, faith school. We are Christians but not church goers and as the admission policy stands, she would have no chance of getting in. I have briefly considered 'faking' it, getting her baptised and started attending church. But what exactly would I be teaching my child? Hypocrisy? Using religion as a tool to get what you want? I can only hope that change will come soon enough for as many non-worshippers children to benefit, mine included.

Roxana, from BRISTOL

[More supporter comments >>>](#)

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