

Religious discrimination against teachers challenged in Northern Ireland

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Northern Ireland's biggest employer of teachers in Catholic schools has called for the scrapping of legislation that allows schools to legally discriminate on religious grounds.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) say the legislation that dates back to 1976 is "outdated".

Teaching jobs in Northern Ireland are exempt from [The Fair Employment and Treatment \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1998](#) which means schools can lawfully discriminate on the grounds of religious belief in the appointment of teachers.

On Wednesday CCMS Chief executive Jim Clarke told an education committee at Stormont: "We would not be obstructing that or seeking to obstruct the removal of that exemption."

Eugene O'Neill, head of HR, finance and governance at CCMS described discriminating on the grounds of religion as "abhorrent".

In Northern Ireland, teachers must hold a teachers' certificate in religious education, before taking up a Catholic primary school post. Statistics indicate that those who do not hold the certificate have 50% fewer job opportunities.

According to the *Belfast Telegraph*, in the current climate of significant education cuts, falling pupil numbers and redundancies, concerns had been raised about access to employment for teachers not holding the certificate.

Similar exemptions in British equality legislation also allow religiously designated state schools in England, Wales and Scotland to discriminate in employment on religious grounds.

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager of the National Secular Society, said: "We applaud The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools' moral leadership on this issue and hope the Catholic Education Service of England & Wales, and the Scottish Catholic Education Service will now show a similar resolve to do the right thing and bring an end to the discrimination.

"Teaching Unions and politicians have demonstrated a total lack of willingness to address religious discrimination against teachers in state funded schools, leaving the NSS virtually alone in [challenging this](#) during the passage of the 2010 Education Act."

"It is time for political and religious leaders to realise that the religious landscape in Britain has changed dramatically, and historic special privileges granted to religious organisations to allow the appointment of teachers on religious grounds are unsustainable, unreasonable and completely unjustifiable."

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