

Opinion poll shows big opposition to faith schools

Posted: Tue, 24 Sep 2013

A new, large scale opinion poll shows that a majority of people in Great Britain are against Government funding of faith schools.

Conducted for the Westminster Faith Debates by Yougov among more than 4,000 people, the survey also reveals that parents choose to send their children to these schools because of academic standards, and not because they have a religious ethos.

The main findings are:

- Only a third of the adult population, irrespective of voting intention, approve of state funding for faith schools. Nearly half actively disapprove, and the rest say they 'don't know'.
- Surprisingly, young people are more positive about faith schools than older people. When asked if the government should provide funding for faith schools, 18-24 year olds are in favour by 43% to 36%, compared with those aged 40-59 who are opposed by 47% to 28%.
- Only a quarter of people who might have a school-age child say they would send him or her to a faith school.
- Overwhelmingly, people say that academic standards matter most in choosing a school. Values and religion count for far less. The question was: "*If you were thinking about if you were planning on sending your child to a school in your local area, which two or three, if any, would influence your choice? (Please tick up to three)*" In response, 70% said they would choose a school on the basis of its academic standard; 23% said they would choose on basis of ethical standards; 5% said they would choose on the basis of giving a "grounding in faith tradition"; and only 3% because for "transmission of belief about God".
- A majority of people don't object to faith schools discriminating on religious grounds in their admissions. (49% thought it was acceptable, with 38% saying it wasn't and 13% "don't know".)
- There isn't majority support for reforming proposals to make faith schools more mixed by admitting a quota from a different faith or none. The question was: *Some people have suggested that all faith schools should admit a proportion of students who follow a different religion or no religion at all. Do you think...?* 23% think "faith schools should have to adopt this policy", while 30% think it is up to the school to decide whether they adopt this policy; 11% think it is better for faith schools to admit only people of the same faith and 26% say there should be no faith schools at all.
- When asked whether the Government should fund "faith schools", 32% said they should while 45% said they shouldn't (the rest didn't know). When broken down by religion, the only kind of "faith school" that has a margin of support is Church of England (4%).
- There is a margin of opposition of 7% against funding Catholic schools, 33% against Jewish and 40% against Islamic and Hindu school. Young people are more positive than older people about funding non-Christian faith schools – e.g. 32% of 18-24 year olds support funding for Islamic schools compared with 16% of 40-59 year olds.

Linda Woodhead, the academic who designed the poll commented: "In abstract debates about faith schools people talk about religion. Secular activists oppose faith schools on grounds of

religious indoctrination and discrimination, while religious people support them because of the faith element. But our poll shows that when choosing a school most parents aren't concerned with religion. They are concerned with academic standards. So long as parents want their children to get the best qualifications, so long as politicians of left and right support parental choice and high academic standards, and so long as faith schools maintain these standards, the debate can rage, but faith schools are not going away."

Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, said: "These comments do not address why faith schools generally have higher standards: broadly because of their unique ability to operate religiously selective admissions policies, which are known to work against children from less affluent backgrounds. Were that privilege to be taken away, the preference for faith schools would soon evaporate."

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