

Claim that children's religious freedoms breached by scrapping of free transport to faith schools rejected by secularists

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A Conservative Assembly Member for South Wales has claimed that by not providing free transport to faith schools local authorities could be denying a child's right to manifest a religion.

AM Suzy Davies's claim was made in a debate over Swansea City Council's plans to end subsidised transport to Swansea's six faith schools.

The National Secular Society has dismissed her argument as a cynical attempt to use human rights instruments to retain special privileges for Christians.

Swansea City and County Council currently provides free transport to Voluntary Aided (VA) Catholic and Church in Wales schools on a discretionary basis regardless of whether the school is the nearest available.

Councillors this week voted, by 34 votes to 17, to provide free transport to faith schools only where there is no nearer mainstream school for a pupil.

The decision was taken despite intense lobbying from faith schools and Catholic families who argue that the changes could restrict opportunities for parents to choose education at a faith school.

During a heated debate in the council chamber, Leader of the opposition Chris Holley said: "In the 30 years I have been a councillor I have never had to get up and defend my faith before. We are picking on a small minority. I can assure you that Swansea's Roman Catholic community will remember what you attacked today."

However, Will Evans, cabinet member for learning and skills, denied the move was an attack in parental choice, saying: "The opportunity for choice for parents is quite clear, they choose any school in Swansea. We have been treating faith schools more favourably over the years by providing free transport."

Raising the matter in the Welsh Assembly, regional AM Suzy Davies argued that many families have a strong faith and wish their children to be educated in a church school.

Ms Davies challenged the Transport Minister, Edwina Hart, over whether Welsh legislation in this area complied with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – which requires signatories to ensure that freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs is limited only when necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. The Minister vowed to look again at Welsh legislation.

Stephen Evans, National Secular Society campaigns manager, said: "Not providing free buses to faith schools in no way interferes with anyone's right to manifest a religion."

"Parents are free to raise their children as they wish and their different religious and philosophical convictions should be respected in all schools. But states are under no obligation to provide faith schools, so the idea that not funding transport to them breaches anyone's rights is simply wrong.

"Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, cited by Suzy Davies, requires states to respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Rather than separating children into faith schools, the best way to respect this is to ensure children are educated in schools that teach about religion and belief, including non-belief, in an objective and pluralistic manner.

"The very schools that Ms Davies wants free transport to are still permitted by law to teach about religion solely from their own exclusive viewpoint. This, rather than the removal of transport privileges, is how young people's religious freedom is being undermined."

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