

Social Integration Commission calls for limits on new faith schools

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A new report by the Social Integration Commission has warned of segregation in Britain and called on the Department for Education (DfE) to place limits on new faith schools.

The report, [*Kingdom United? Thirteen steps to tackle social segregation*](#), warns that "highly diverse areas are not necessarily integrated" and that "school-age young people are segregated by ethnicity." The report notes that "increased numbers of children [are] being educated in peer groups dominated by a single faith group or community" and makes a number of recommendations to avert further social division in the UK.

Given the dangers of segregation in a country which is on the whole becoming more diverse, the report argues that the DfE should only approve applications for new faith schools "when the petitioners have a clear plan for pupils to meet and mix with children from different faith backgrounds and communities." The Commission says that "every school should provide opportunities for their pupils to interact with children belonging to different ethnic groups and income backgrounds."

The report was welcomed as "a step in the right direction" by the National Secular Society, which campaigns for inclusive schools underpinned by secular principles.

NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans commented: "The long-term impact of dividing children by their parents' religion should be obvious. This report demonstrates the huge potential damage to our society if children are divided by the religion of their parents, and the very real danger posed by lack of integration between different religious and ethnic groups.

"Religion is a matter for parents and family life, the state should have no role in perpetuating religious divisions through schooling."

"The solution is clear, parents have the right to raise their children in a religious tradition, but they should not have a right to isolate their children from other groups on the basis of faith, or to ask the taxpayer to fund the furtherance of their religious beliefs in schools. Children have the right to an education which prepares them for life in modern Britain."

The Commission also calls upon the DfE to investigate "the potential benefits of requiring all schools to devise a social mixing strategy." The report attributes the increase in pupils being educated in faith schools to "the recent drive to open free schools", and raises the alarm over the potential consequences for social integration. The Commission argues that the increase in free schools needs to be reconciled with a "commitment to social integration".

The report suggests faith schools from different religions could build new facilities for shared use, or "co-locating" faith schools "within shared campuses." One such school, [*believed to be the first in Europe*](#), was recently approved to open in Scotland. The campus will be a joint site shared between Jewish and Catholic schools.

The report argues that "all children should be taught about faiths and cultures other than *their own*" and that "all schools should seek to include opportunities within their religious studies programmes for pupils to mix with and study religious practices and ethical questions alongside children of different faiths and backgrounds."

The Commission also found that "the small number of Muslim faith schools in the UK are experiencing particular difficulties in ensuring their pupils are able to meet and mix with children from different backgrounds."

Citing "public anxiety regarding religious extremism in our schools" the Commission argues that "we must make promoting social integration an important element of our approach to education."

In addition to its findings on faith schools, the report also argues that "publicly-funded moments of celebration should be open to people from all religions and none." The Commission found that "it is not uncommon for people to feel alienated by and unwelcome at nominally-public celebrations rooted in religious and cultural traditions other than their own." The National Secular Society campaigns for all public celebrations, such as the coronation, to be secular in nature, so that they are accessible to all.

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