

NSS urges Education Secretary not to force Isle of Wight pupils into faith schools

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The National Secular Society has written to Education Secretary Nicky Morgan objecting to plans to close down a non-religiously designated academy – leaving pupils with no option other than to attend a faith school.

In a letter expressing the Society's "deep concern" at the proposals, NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans urged the Secretary of State to ensure parents can continue to receive a state education for their children which does not run counter to their philosophical convictions.

Academies Enterprise Trust (AET), which runs Weston Academy, is seeking permission to close the school in December, claiming that falling pupil numbers will make it increasingly difficult to maintain the school. The Education Secretary had agreed in principle but a final decision is expected later this month.

However, the projected pupil numbers cited by AET to justify the closure are being robustly challenged by a parents' action group set up to fight the closure. Weston Academy Action Group (WAAG) say a forecast discussed at previous governors' meetings shows numbers increasing rather than decreasing, as claimed by AET.

The group has collected more than 1,500 handwritten signatures and almost [600 online responses](#) supporting their campaign to keep the school open.

Weston Academy is one of only two non-faith-based primary schools in West Wight, but with the next nearest being twelve miles away, and oversubscribed, parents face being left with no alternative to a religious school.

Isle of Wight Council, which is responsible for ensuring diversity of provision, told the NSS it was aware of the concerns but stressed that the decision rests with the Secretary of State and not the Council due to the Academy status of the school. Leader Jonathan Bacon said "The Council has been informed of the proposed decision rather than being the decision maker."

The school was [saved from closure](#) in 2011 by opting out of local authority control and gaining academy status after the National Secular Society supported local parents campaigning to keep the school open.

Since gaining academy status the school has been placed in special measures, but in May this year Ofsted reported that teaching and leadership at the school was improving.

Parent George Metcalf said: "Weston Primary is the only non-denominational school locally, and whilst its numbers are relatively small, it does not suffer from large over capacity as some others locally do."

Stephen Evans, National Secular Society campaigns manager, added: "It is clear that the closure of the only non-religiously designated school in the area will cause real and significant hardship to parents who wish their children to be taught in a non-faith school setting, and are simply not

prepared to accept them being taught in a school with a religious ethos.

"The Secretary of State should not underestimate the strength with which many non-religious parents hold their convictions and should think very carefully before making a decision that will force children into faith schools against their parents' wishes."

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