

Faith school heads and governors raise concerns about academy religious takeovers

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Religious leaders are set to steamroll faith schools into massive academy chains, centralising church control over the state-funded schools.

Headteachers and staff have raised serious opposition to the plans, which would see a school's diocese taking direct control over it, with the authority "to appoint and dismiss all trustees", *TES* reported.

The Government dropped plans to compel all state schools in England to become academies in the face of overwhelming opposition in Parliament. But diocesan proposals, seen by *TES*, have been described as "forced academisation by the back door."

Rob Kelsall of the NAHT headteachers' union told *TES* that headteachers were worried about a loss of autonomy if the proposals are enacted.

Under the plans 600 church schools would be run by large academy trusts, each overseeing 22 schools.

Schools will have to opt-in to the plans, but *TES* questioned whether headteachers and governors would truly feel able to defy the wishes of their "highly influential" diocese.

In December the Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster proposed to headteachers and governors that 180 schools join 12 multi-academy trusts (MATs), with each trust governed by a single board which would act "as the governing body for up to 15 schools".

TES reported that the London Diocesan Board for Schools sought to run 156 schools through MATs, appointing directors to each trust.

The Board claimed that there would be "no pressure" on schools to become academies "unless there are benefits for pupils in converting".

One governor of a Catholic primary school, who was appointed to her post by the Diocese Board, said she was "gobsmacked" by the plans and that schools were essentially told "you have to become an academy in the next five years".

She said that the balance was "right" at the moment, but that under the plans "I worry about what is coming" because of the Diocese gaining more control over the school.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster told *TES* that academisation would allow the promotion of "Catholic mission and identity" in schools.

The National Secular Society has [previously](#) written to the Government expressing concerns that the push to turn schools into academies would increase religious control of taxpayer-funded faith schools.

In June the NSS wrote to Nick Gibb the Schools Minister to raise the example of one VC primary school in Winchester which has been told to "join a trust with a majority of church trustees" despite the unanimous opposition of governors.

Voluntary Controlled schools currently have a minority of their governors appointed by the church; but as a part of a religious academy trusts VC schools "will suddenly find themselves under the direct control of the Diocese," the NSS warned.

NSS campaigns director Stephen Evans said: "At a time when the nation is drifting away from Christianity it seems perverse that churches are gaining ever greater control and influence over young people's education.

"Growing irreligiosity means religious control of publicly funded education is both inappropriate and, in the long term, wholly unsustainable."

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