

“Unacceptable” for Ultra-Orthodox faith schools to shun children with transgender parents, says DfE

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The Department for Education is to investigate faith schools implicated in the ostracisation of children of transgender parents highlighted by a recent family court ruling.

In a letter to the National Secular Society, schools minister Lord Nash said the behaviour by schools referred to in the ruling was "unacceptable".

A family court judge raised serious concerns about the behaviour of Ultra-Orthodox Charedi schools when dealing with a case involving a transgender father who sought contact with their five children, who remained with their mother in the Orthodox Jewish community.

Mr Justice Peter Jackson ultimately ruled that the reaction of adults in the community would be so hostile that he could not permit the father's request. Despite Mr Justice Jackson believing the children could adapt to the changed circumstances and contact with their father, he found that the children would face severe ostracism from the community, were they to have any contact.

During the case the headteacher at one of the children's schools said that "the school would face tremendous pressure from the parent body, private donors and the governors, to suggest that the child find a more suitable educational environment" if they were in contact with their transgender father.

A teacher at another school attended by one of the children said there would be "pressure... not to allocate a place to any child who will bring these potential risks."

This teacher said it would be "very difficult" for the school to even "process an application for a child who fits the above description."

The National Secular Society was extremely concerned by the attitude of the schools exposed in the case, and wrote to the Department for Education.

The case "is clearly not an isolated incident," NSS executive director Keith Porteous Wood wrote.

"We fear that these examples are symptomatic of a total unwillingness to expose children attending Orthodox religious schools to anything that does not fit in the 'fundamentalist communities' (the judge's words) world view."

"The court was even told of a case of a 15-year-old girl who was forced to move schools after being ostracised by parents and pupils because she had been 'sexually abused in the community'."

Lord Nash said "Schools must actively promote principles which encourage respect for other people".

"We are working with Ofsted to ensure that the relevant schools are inspected, paying particular attention to these standards. Where failings are found, we will not hesitate to take action".

The NSS also asked the Department for Education to set out what was being done to regulate illegal unregistered where intolerant attitudes were "likely to be particularly acute."

Lord Nash said the Government shared the NSS's concerns about unregistered schools, saying they were "illegal, unsafe and are denying pupils a good education."

The minister said that where "we find evidence that a school is operating illegally we will not hesitate to take action, which could include closing the school or working with the police as necessary."

He added that since January 2016 Ofsted inspections into unregistered schools had "escalated", with new inspectors "dedicated to identifying such schools" and a "tougher approach to prosecuting them".

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