

Church to gain influence over nine secular schools in Northumberland

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Concerns have been raised over plans for nine community schools in Northumberland to join with one Church of England faith school to form the new Tynedale Community Learning Trust – a mixed multi academy trust (MAT) that will have a majority of church appointed members.

Concerns have been raised over the Church's role in appointing members and directors of the Trust.

Under the proposals, the Church will appoint three out of five members of the trust (one of which will be in consultation with the schools), who will then appoint a majority of the 11 directors of the MAT, including one 'Church Director'. With the exception of the 'Church Director', the members will be required to appoint members on the basis of their skills, rather than applying a religious test.

An ex-parent governor at one of the schools involved, who resigned over the plans told the NSS: "This is nothing short of a church takeover of nine non-church schools, and any parents wishing to guard against church influence in their children's education should be rightly worried. In addition, the RSC has confirmed that the option chosen in this case represents a deviation from current government policy for mixed MATs. The safeguards for non-church schools with this arrangement are woefully inadequate."

According to letters to parents, the funding agreement will stipulate that the community school ethos of the schools should be protected by the trustees and local governing bodies of the community schools.

Alastair Lichten, NSS campaigns officer, said "Concerns about [academisation](#) and through it religious takeovers of community schools, form a significant part of our [casework](#). Despite the reassuring noises of the consultation documents, parents and governors are right to raise concerns. If trustees are to be appointed on the basis of their skills, rather than their faith – as all trustees of state schools should be – then what possible justification is there for the Church appointing three out of the five people who will decide on these appointments?

"We see no reason or justification for a 'Church director' – even if only one of eleven, the same proportion of foundation governors at the faith school involved - to be appointed to make decisions on the governance of nine community schools.

"Assurances over protecting the community ethos of schools are welcome, but we have seen them before and it is clear that there are a range of soft options for the Church to promote – as is their stated intention – their ethos in community schools which they have a role in running. There is no clear inspection standard or oversight in protecting a community school ethos. Ultimately the extent to which these nine schools truly remain secular is up to the efforts of the parents and staff."

Describing the plans as "huge" and "mammoth", the Hexham Courant [reported](#) that "talks between heads and governors are at a very advanced stage".

The schools are running a [consultation](#) process which will close at 5pm on Wednesday 7th July 2017. The basic [requirements](#) for a public body carrying out a consultation are:

- Consultation must be at a time when proposals are at a formative stage.
- The proposer must give sufficient reasons for its proposals to allow consultees to understand them and respond to them properly.
- Consulters must give [sufficient time](#) for responses to be made and considered.
- Responses must be [conscientiously taken into account](#) in finalising the decision.

If you have concerns about religious organisations taking over your school, please contact education@secularism.org.uk

See also: [Fear over new schools trust - Hexham Courant](#) | [Church of England sidesteps government rules over multi-academy trust control](#) - Schools Week

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