

NSS: education secretary must keep faith-based admissions cap

Posted: Tue, 09 Jan 2018

The National Secular Society has urged the new education secretary Damian Hinds to drop plans to remove the 50% cap on religiously selective admissions to faith-based academies and free schools.

Damian Hinds replaces Justine Greening, who resigned as education secretary in Theresa May's cabinet reshuffle. It was understood that Greening opposed plans to drop the 50% cap, but Hinds is a proponent of religiously selective schools and in 2014 led a [debate in Parliament](#) where he advocated for the removal of any cap on faith-based admissions to Catholic schools.

In a [letter](#) Stephen Evans, the NSS chief executive, called on Mr Hinds to rethink his stance and consider not only the effect that the lifting of the cap would have on Catholic schools, but the way it would impact on all other faith schools, including minority faith schools.

He urged the new Secretary of State to "strike a blow for cohesion, equality and fairness" by abandoning plans to remove the cap.

"A further expansion of religiously selective faith schools is the antithesis of inclusive education," Mr Evans wrote. "Rather than facilitating segregation along religious lines, we would urge the Government to make every effort to ensure that children of all faiths and none are educated together in inclusive schools".

In 2016 the Government launched a consultation on [proposals](#) to create a wave of new faith-based schools and allow religious discrimination in 100% of new faith school admissions.

It has now been more than a year since the consultation closed, and the Government is yet to confirm whether it intends to proceed with the plans.

Groups such as the Catholic Education Service (CES) lobbied for the changes. The CES is refusing to open free schools because of the cap – arguing that canon law dictates that Catholic schools must give priority to children of Catholic parents.

In its letter to Mr Hinds the NSS said the proposals had "the potential to significantly increase religious discrimination and social and ethnic segregation within publicly funded schools". It said they would "allow more children to be schooled in a completely immersive religious environment, surrounded by pupils of the same faith and, in many cases, the same ethnic background". The "broad consensus", it added, was that the plans would harm social cohesion.

The Sutton Trust has warned that removal of the cap would be "likely to make [faith schools] even more unrepresentative of their local areas, reducing the number of good school places available to pupils across the socio- economic spectrum." The Education Policy Institute has warned that the policy is unlikely to increase social mobility, which is one of the supposed objectives behind it.

And Ofsted's chief inspector, Amanda Spielman, has said "admission 100% on faith leads to increased levels of segregation within communities".

The NSS added that lifting the cap was inconsistent with the Department for Education's own guidance on 'promoting fundamental British values'. The guidance says it is "unacceptable" for schools to "promote discrimination against people or groups on the basis of their belief, opinion or background".

Mr Hinds was himself educated at [St. Ambrose College](#), a Roman Catholic Grammar school which was the subject of the biggest historic sex abuse case ever mounted by Greater Manchester Police.

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Also see:

[NSS coverage of the debate Hinds led in 2014](#)

[Concerns over Catholic Church's 2014 donation to Damian Hinds](#) (The Guardian)

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