

# NSS welcomes Lib Dem proposal to end faith schools in Scotland

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The National Secular Society has welcomed a proposal by the Scottish Liberal Democrats to end sectarian schools by pursuing a "single secular model of state-funded education".

The [motion](#), which was due to be discussed at the party's autumn conference on Saturday, calls on the Scottish government to end faith-based admissions and employment restrictions in state schools.

After the conference the Scottish Lib Dems told the NSS it had referred the motion back to its policy committee "to come again to a later conference".

The issue is expected to be debated during the party's spring conference next year, although Alex Cole-Hamilton - an MSP who opposed the motion - [claimed](#) the party would take abolition of state Catholic schools "off the table".

[Teachers](#) need approval from local bishops to work in Scottish Catholic schools, while some over-subscribed Catholic schools prioritise pupils with a baptism certificate. The motion highlights the fact the Equality Act 2010 legislates against discrimination on the grounds of religious belief or lack of it.

It also calls for the removal of non-elected church positions from local authority education boards, to be replaced with elected positions open to residents residing in the local authority. Local authority education boards in Scotland are currently required to reserve three places for religious representatives.

The proposal notes that the education system in Scotland "was borne out of a culture of religious prejudice and inequality, when the church had to fund schools in order for children of a particular faith to receive an education". It also says "society, religious belief, education and equal rights have evolved significantly in the intervening period" and "schools are no longer funded by the church and are now funded by the state".

It also points out that countries across the globe "have reduced or removed the links with the church in state funded schools".

Instead of faith schools, the proposal suggests enabling schools to introduce an optional "religion hour" before or after the school day to provide "the opportunity for pupils to practice their faith and receive religious instruction if they so wish".

The motion was moved by Yvonne Finlayson, candidate for Motherwell & Wishaw.

The National Secular Society welcomed the motion. Alastair Lichten, education and schools officer at the NSS, said: "The Scottish Liberal Democrats are proposing a fair and inclusive approach to education, an approach that the NSS has [advocated for](#) years.

"Faith schools in Scotland fuel sectarianism, segregation and discriminate against children, families and teachers of no faith and minority faiths. The proposals moved by the Scottish Lib Dems will enhance freedom of belief, restore equality and democracy to the education system, and help to build a more cohesive Scottish society."

There are nearly 400 local authority faith schools in Scotland. Three are Episcopalian, one is Jewish, and the remainder are Catholic.

In August, Scotland's education minister [told the NSS](#) that his government has "no plans" to change religion's privileged role in education.

Paisley Liberal Democrat councillor Eileen McCartin [told](#) the *Scottish Catholic Observer* she planned to oppose the motion.

Ms McCartin has previously [stated](#) that "there is an ethos of belief and humanity in Catholic schools which is not always present in non-denominational schools".

The Catholic Church in Scotland [called](#) the motion "deeply illiberal", saying it "shows contempt for religious freedom and discriminates against parents who choose to send their children to Catholic schools".

## **The motion in full**

### **SC6: The role of the Church in the Education System**

#### **Conference notes:**

1. That the education system in Scotland was borne out of a culture of religious prejudice and inequality, when the church had to fund schools in order for children of a particular faith to receive an education.
2. That society, religious belief, education and equal rights have evolved significantly in the intervening period and schools are no longer funded by the church and are now funded by the state.
3. That countries across the globe have reduced or removed the links with the church in state funded schools.
4. That some local authorities apply faith as a selection criteria for denominational schools, yet faith (or no faith) is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.
5. That the Church continues to have a role in advising on the suitability for employment of teachers in faith schools funded by a local authority.
6. That authorities must reserve three non-elected seats on education boards for religious representatives, as set out in the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973.

#### **Conference believes:**

1. That state-funded schools should not have entry or placement criteria based on faith.
2. That teachers who do not fulfil particular religious or lifestyle criteria are discriminated against in some denominational schools as they can't apply for promoted posts.

3. That the non-elected posts for religious representatives on education boards should cease, and be replaced by the introduction of elected posts.

#### **Conference calls for the Scottish Government to:**

1. Pursue a single secular model of state-funded education.
2. Remove religious belief as a placing criteria for Scottish state funded schools.
3. Enable schools to introduce an optional "religion hour" before or after the school day providing the opportunity for pupils to practice their faith and receive religious instruction if they so wish.
4. Remove faith as a criteria for selecting or recommending teachers for employment or promotion.
5. Remove the non-elected church positions from local authority education boards and replace with elected positions open to residents residing in the local authority.

*This story was originally published on 7 September. It was updated on 10 September to reflect the fact the motion had been referred back to the party's policy committee and 14 September to reflect Alex Cole-Hamilton's comments.*

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