

Ofsted head issues warning on religious pressure in education

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The National Secular Society has said the government "must heed" a warning from the chief inspector of schools in England that religious pressure is undermining children's education.

In a [letter](#) to the chair of the Public Accounts Committee this week, Amanda Spielman called for tougher action on [unregistered schools](#) and better guidance for schools resisting "community pressures". She also advocated a register of [home educated](#) children.

Spielman called unregistered schools "a huge concern". She said Ofsted inspectors had been "shocked by what they have found" in them and called for more powers to deal with them.

She warned of narrow curricula in unregistered schools, with some giving children "a predominantly or exclusively religious education", and the potential for child abuse.

She said Ofsted inspectors had found "extremely worrying material" in some of these schools. She cited examples of books that say men may use physical violence against their wives, tell women not to refuse their husbands sex and call for the death of gay people.

Inspectors have found similar material in poorly performing registered independent schools and a maintained community school.

Spielman added that the premises in unregistered schools are "often squalid and unsafe" and the quality of education offered is "often poor".

"We have heard from children in these schools who, for instance, were never taught basic mathematics or how to read English."

She said Ofsted's lack of power to seize evidence means "we are tackling this problem with one hand tied behind our back" and called for "a tighter definition of what constitutes a school".

The NSS has [campaigned](#) for years for measures to address the growth of unregistered schools. Last week two people were [convicted](#) of running an illegal school in the first successful prosecution brought for that reason in England.

Spielman also urged the government and local authorities to support schools which resist "community pressures" to restrict children's rights in the name of religion.

"I am concerned that too little support is given by the DfE (Department for Education) and local authorities to schools that face pressure from groups in the local community or national pressure groups.

"When these groups press for changes in school policy on the basis of religion or culture, it can lead to the curtailing of rights of other protected groups, most often girls. This can affect what is taught, what is not taught, what activities children take part in and what they are withdrawn from, and what children wear or do not wear.

"Ofsted will always support schools that make the right decisions in the interests of all children who attend their school, particularly when this is in the face of undue influence. However, as the inspectorate, there is only so much we can do. We very much hope that the DfE moves to put in place stronger guidance to support schools that find themselves in these circumstances. "

Last year the NSS asked the government to issue guidance on religious dress in schools after [revealing](#) that girls in dozens of English schools are forced to wear hijabs. The NSS reiterated its call earlier this year after a highly-rated primary school in east London which restricted the hijab and fasting [backed down](#) amid a campaign of intimidation from opponents.

Spielman called for a register of children in home education, saying some parents "use home education as a guise to allow them to use illegal schools or to evade the scrutiny of public services".

"The lack of information about where these children end up is perhaps my greatest concern as chief inspector. I am not proposing that Ofsted inspects home education, but we must now move to a registration process run by local authorities.

"This would ensure that we know where these children are and that they are safe. I very much hope that the DfE moves quickly from its recent call for evidence to a concrete legislative solution."

In July the NSS [backed](#) plans for a register of home educated children.

The NSS has previously [raised concerns](#) that religious groups exploit lax home schooling regulation to indoctrinate children with narrow worldviews. In March a Metropolitan Police study [found](#) that half of 70 known extremists in London removed their children from state schools to educate them at home.

NSS education and schools officer Alastair Lichten said the government "must heed" Spielman's latest comments.

"Amanda Spielman has highlighted a series of problems which need to be tackled. Unregistered schools are failing to provide children with an adequate education. It is particularly shocking that material promoting violence against women and promoting the death of LGBT people has been found in establishments which supposedly educate children.

"Schools which stand up to unreasonable religious bullying need more support. And registration would be a minimal and reasonable imposition on home education which would strike a reasonable balance between children's rights and families' autonomy.

"The government must not shy away from confronting these issues out of a misplaced desire to avoid offending religious sensitivities."

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