

Faith schools significantly limit choice for many parents, NSS finds

Posted: Sat, 08 Dec 2018

Almost three in ten families in England live in areas where most or all of the local primary schools are faith-based, National Secular Society research has revealed.

The NSS's report [The Choice Delusion](#), published today and featured exclusively in [The Sunday Times](#), highlights a severe lack of reasonably accessible religiously-neutral schools for those that want them.

The report reveals:

- Between 111,000 and 136,000 applicant families lived in areas where the availability of secular schools was highly restricted in September 2018.
- A further 45,000 to 60,000 lived in areas where it was extremely restricted.
- More than one in five families who missed out on their first choice of a non-faith primary school were assigned a faith school.
- This includes 1,398 families who had made all their preferences (typically five) for a non-faith school.
- Families in rural areas were most affected by the restrictions, as 53% of all rural primary schools are faith based.
- The analysis found high or extreme restrictions on secular schooling in 43.4% of rural areas.

A common complaint from rural families who the NSS spoke to was that a faith school was the only school in their village.

The NSS based its findings on a study of the three closest schools for hypothetical parents in 520 representative, randomly-selected English postcodes.

In response to the findings the NSS has written to the Department for Education (DfE) to urge it to monitor faith-based restrictions on school choice and suitability and ensure that all parents have reasonable access to a non-faith-based school.

The government has made no estimate of the number of people living in areas where the only reasonably available state schools are faith-based.

The society has also said the problem identified in the report is likely to increase if the DfE fails to act, as the proportion of faith schools is rising. This trend defies a long-term [move away](#) from religious affiliation among British people, particularly among the young.

The NSS's report also highlights several case studies where parents have effectively been left with no option other than to send their children to faith schools against their wishes.

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said the report "seriously undermines the claim" that "faith schools expand parents' choices".

"Our findings demonstrate that not only are thousands of families being denied access to

appropriate schools for their children, but the Department for Education is failing to act to remedy the situation.

"In our case work we've assisted Christian parents allocated Sikh schools, atheist parents allocated Christian schools and even a Muslim parent allocated a place for her son in an Orthodox Jewish School.

"The best way to solve this would be to roll back faith schools so all state schools are free from religious affiliation and open to all children. While faith schools persist, the government must monitor the ways in which they impose on school choice and ensure all families can access a secular and properly inclusive education for their child."

[Read the report in full.](#)

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