

Birmingham school suspends diversity lessons despite Ofsted backing

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A school has suspended lessons about diversity amid objections from predominantly Muslim parents over references to LGBT people, despite backing for its curriculum from Ofsted inspectors.

Parkfield Community School in Birmingham, where almost all children are from Muslim backgrounds, has been at the centre of a coordinated campaign against its 'No Outsiders' lessons in recent weeks.

Those objecting to the lessons have organised protests and mass withdrawals of children, while a member of staff who organised the lessons has reportedly been subjected to a personal campaign of abuse and [threats](#).

In a [statement](#) on Wednesday the school said it would not resume teaching the lessons "until a resolution has been reached" with parents who object to the programme.

"Nothing is more important than ensuring our children's education continues uninterrupted.

"We are eager to continue to work together with parents over the coming days and weeks to find a solution that will support the children in our school to continue their education in a harmonious environment."

The school said the decision had come after a meeting between parents, the trust which runs the school and the regional schools commissioner.

Members of a parents' group behind the protests also [reported](#) having "a positive meeting" with the Department for Education (DfE) about the lessons this week.

National Secular Society chief executive Stephen Evans described the decision as "very alarming" and said it raised "uncomfortable questions for the Department for Education".

"Parents fuelled by intolerance, prejudice and misinformation have shamefully used their children as bargaining chips to bully school leaders into suspending these lessons about diversity.

"This sets a damaging precedent which will harm children's right to a decent education, undermine teachers, fuel intolerance towards LGBT people and encourage more unreasonable religious demands.

"We must resist efforts to change school curricula to fit the bigoted agendas of vocal groups of parents."

The NSS [wrote](#) to schools minister Nick Gibb last week to urge the DfE to provide "unequivocal support" to the school and Moffatt.

The school's decision to suspend the lessons comes despite a letter from the education watchdog Ofsted which backed the school's curriculum earlier this week.

Ofsted inspectors paid a short visit to the school last month after parents claimed the 'No Outsiders' lessons focused disproportionately on LGBT issues and was not age-appropriate.

In a [letter](#) summarising its findings last week it said it had found no evidence to support the claims.

The letter praised the school's record on promoting "tolerance, acceptance and mutual respect" and described it as "a cohesive community".

"Staff from a wide range of cultures and beliefs work well together and actively model tolerance, acceptance and mutual respect. As a result, pupils are consistently courteous, considerate and respectful of others."

The report also noted that most pupils who spoke to inspectors said the school's lessons and extra-curricular activities helped to "bring pupils together" so "no one is left out".

It said a "very small, but vocal, minority of parents" were "not clear about the school's vision, policies and practice".

It also reaffirmed the school's previously-issued 'outstanding' rating.

This weekend the education secretary Damian Hinds indicated that he would back heads' judgement in teaching about LGBT issues in remarks to [Schools Week](#).

"I've always been clear that I support headteachers to make decisions and we believe in school autonomy, that school leaders are best placed to make decisions.

"Of course, it's also right to consult with parents. That is just good practice anyway, but yes I do back headteachers."

Mr Evans said these words "need to be backed up by actions".

"These comments appeared, at face value, to be a reminder that heads had the authority to resist unreasonable religious parental pressure. But they will be meaningless if the DfE does not take action to support schools which come under that pressure."

In recent weeks there have been sizable protests against the No Outsiders lessons outside Parkfield's school gates. Christian and Jewish protesters have joined Muslims in criticising the school.

Last week a widely-shared video [emerged](#) from outside the school showing protesters claiming the lessons were "aggressively promoting" LGBT "lifestyles".

A speaker also complained that the lessons suggested "it is okay for you to be Muslim and for you to be gay". Parents and pupils responded by chanting "shame, shame, shame".

Earlier this month an estimated 600 pupils – around 80% of the school roll – were [withdrawn](#) from school in protest against No Outsiders.

The school's latest statement expressed "hope" that children would now not be removed again to take part in protests.

Parkfield had initially indicated that a suspension in the 'No Outsiders' lessons was the result of a pre-planned break in the curriculum for the current half-term. It had [said](#) they would continue after the Easter break.

The row comes amid gathering religious opposition to teaching about relationships and sex. Primarily religious campaigners, including the mainly Muslim group [Stop RSE](#), are opposing the teaching of a new curriculum on relationships, sex and health (RSHE).

All schools will be required to teach RSHE from September 2020. Last month the government [resisted](#) religious pressure to extend parents' right to withdraw their children from RSHE when the new guidance comes into force.

Note: This story was updated on Thursday 14 March to reflect the school's decision to suspend the lessons.

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