

Thousands sent to faith schools against their families' preferences

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More than 130,000 children have been sent to faith schools in England despite their parents expressing a preference for a non-faith school since 2014, National Secular Society research has revealed.

The society has found that [132,216 children were assigned to faith schools](#) despite their families listing a non-faith school as their first preference between 2014 and 2020.

Almost a fifth (26,163) of those pupils were assigned to schools which their families hadn't listed as preferences at all.

The NSS's figures were derived from Department for Education responses to freedom of information requests. The research also revealed that, in 2020:

- 20,340 pupils were sent to faith schools despite their families listing a non-faith school as their first preference. This number was similar to the equivalent figure for 2019, and had risen from 16,824 in 2014.
- 11,519 of those were at secondary level and 8,821 were at primary level.
- More than 4,200 of those were assigned schools which their families hadn't listed as preferences at all.

NSS comment

NSS head of education Alastair Lichten said: "Proponents of faith schools often defend them on the grounds of parental choice. But every year the state is pushing religion on thousands of children against their families' preferences.

"Disappointingly the government continues to open new faith schools even as the evidence against them stacks up. Ministers should look to roll back faith schools and open inclusive, secular schools which enable children to make their own minds up about religion.

"If they won't commit to that they should at least ensure every child has a right to a suitable secular school within a reasonable distance, so families can be free from religion if they choose."

Latest government support for faith schools

- The schools proposed in the latest wave of the government's free schools programme include [19 faith schools](#) – 14 Christian, three Islamic and two Sikh.
- In July the education secretary [claimed](#) faith schools provide "greater choice for parents – of all faiths and of none" in an [address](#) to the Board of Deputies of British Jews.

Previous NSS research

- In 2018 a major NSS report, [The Choice Delusion](#), found that almost three in 10 families in England live in areas where most or all of the closest primary schools are faith schools.
- The report's recommendations included that:
 - National and local government should monitor faith-based restrictions on school choice.
 - Faith-based discrimination in school admissions should be phased out.
 - A moratorium should be introduced on the opening of new faith schools and it should be easier for faith schools to lose their religious designation, particularly where they are unrepresentative of local communities.
 - All families should be legally entitled to have reasonable access to a non-faith school.

Difficulties finding secular education

A number of signatories to the NSS's [No More Faith Schools petition](#) have spoken of difficulties finding a secular education for their children.

For example signatory Victoria, from Medway, said her son had been placed in a faith school despite the fact it was not one of her six choices, and he would be required to attend "all Catholic services".

And Anne from Milton Keynes said a child where she lived would have to travel "at least six miles to attend a secular school, passing several church schools along the way".

Press coverage and DfE response

The NSS's findings were [reported in i/News](#) on Tuesday morning. The Department for Education told the paper it was "committed to offering parents and children a diverse education system, which includes the option of faith schools".

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