

Don't let schools push creationism as science, NSS tells government

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The National Secular Society has raised the alarm over a school which claims to teach creationism as science as it urged the government to defend children's rights in persistently failing independent faith schools.

The NSS has raised the case of The Vine Christian School in Berkshire in a letter to schools minister Elizabeth Berridge on children's rights in independent faith schools.

The school, which uses the Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) programme as its core curriculum, says on [the curriculum page of its website](#) that "science is taught from the Biblical perspective of creation".

Legal standards allow independent schools to teach creationism as part of a belief system, but also say "it should not be presented as having a similar or superior evidence base to scientific theories".

Following the NSS's intervention, the Department for Education (DfE) has said it is considering options to ensure the education of children at the school is protected – including possibly deregistering the school.

Failures at the school

The Vine Christian School was [found 'inadequate' on various grounds](#) during an Ofsted inspection last year and was subject to an additional inspection last month. It failed to meet all the standards that were [checked during that inspection](#).

The latest report features significant criticisms of the school's safeguarding policies. It says there is "not a secure culture of safeguarding in the school", adding: "Some pupils do not feel that they can talk about things that might be worrying them, because they think they are not allowed to."

Contents of NSS letter

The NSS's letter formed part of ongoing correspondence with the DfE over children's rights in independent faith schools which repeatedly fail inspections.

The society's chief executive Stephen Evans wrote that "intransigent proprietors of independent religious schools appear able to systematically undermine children's educational rights without consequence".

He added that the government was "falling short on its obligation" to children in consistently failing schools.

Previous NSS correspondence with government

The NSS [first raised this subject](#) in a letter to Berridge earlier this year.

One school which the NSS mentioned in its letter at the time, Bnois Jerusalem Girls School in north London, was [criticised by Ofsted](#) last year for teaching about creationism in geography and science.

In response, the minister said the DfE was considering what action to take over Bnois Jerusalem. She added that decisions over action against the schools had been delayed as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak.

DfE and school response to latest story

In a [comment to iNews](#) last night, a DfE spokesperson said: "The safety and education of our children and young people is paramount, regardless of the setting in which they are being taught.

"The Vine Christian School in Berkshire has failed to meet the independent school standards – and despite giving them time to improve they have not been able to do so. We are now discussing next steps, including deregistration.

"We will continue to work with the school, parents and families to ensure all children have access to an appropriate education."

The Vine school was contacted by *i* but declined to comment.

NSS comment

Mr Evans said: "Any school which teaches creationism in lieu of scientific theories is failing to prepare children for life in 21st century Britain and has breached the independent school standards.

"The Department for Education's response in this case is encouraging. Ministers must be prepared to take appropriate action where children's rights are being systematically undermined.

"But they should also address the wider concern that children are languishing in schools which are repeatedly and seriously failing. Religious sensitivities mustn't stand in the way of children's fundamental right to a quality education."

Wider concerns over the ACE curriculum and creationism

The [web page](#) of Christian Education Europe, a group which provides the ACE curriculum, says it supports "dozens of Christian Schools throughout the UK and Europe that are Christ-Centred, Character-Building, and Creation Based".

The group also says it works with at least 15 schools in England.

Four years ago nine faith schools which teach the ACE curriculum were [downgraded](#) following Ofsted inspections, amid concerns including the teaching of creationism.

And in 2017 an independent Christian primary school which used the ACE curriculum and taught the Bible's creation story in science lessons [received a damning Ofsted report](#).

Convention protections of children's rights

- Mr Evans's letter noted that the European Convention on Human Rights affords parents the right to bring up their children in line with their religious beliefs. But it added that this must be balanced against children's independent rights.
- It also noted that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child protects children's right to "freedom of thought, conscience and religion".

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