

Bill seeks to end religious discrimination against teachers in NI

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The National Secular Society is backing a bill which has been introduced in the Northern Ireland assembly to end a legal exemption allowing religious discrimination against teachers.

The private member's bill would end an exemption for teaching posts in the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998, which provides protection to workers against discrimination on religious grounds.

Chris Lyttle, an Alliance MLA and chair of the education committee at Stormont, has proposed the bill.

In a [consultation survey](#) on it, he said the current loophole enables schools to "use religious belief as grounds on which to discriminate between candidates for teaching posts".

The NSS is planning to respond and argue in favour of removing the exemption.

Several teaching unions have called for the exemption to be removed and this week NI's first minister Arlene Foster said there was "[a need to deal with this issue](#)".

Current NSS campaigning

The NSS is lobbying on several fronts to end religious discrimination against teachers in Northern Ireland.

The NSS has called on a [major independent review of education](#) in NI to recommend ending the exemption as part of wider reforms.

The society also recently wrote to the education secretary in NI to urge him to address this issue and has urged teaching unions to back it.

NSS comment

NSS head of education Alastair Lichten said the move would represent "an important step towards a fairer, more inclusive education system in Northern Ireland".

"Allowing religious discrimination against teachers is both wrong in principle and counter-productive. No teacher should face discrimination when applying for jobs. Allowing schools to discriminate against teachers also undermines social cohesion and creates a needless barrier to children receiving the best possible education.

"We hope the widespread support for this bill translates into meaningful action, and prompts wider-reaching reform of the education system so schools serve the interests of Northern Irish society, rather than the vested interests of churches."

Impact of discrimination

- In 2019 research from Ulster University's School of Education found that segregated education and legal discrimination were [causing the "cultural encapsulation"](#) of teachers in Northern Ireland along religious sectarian lines.

Update, 29 April 2021

The NSS has submitted a [response to the consultation](#).

Update, 18 May 2021

A separate non-binding motion calling for an end to religious discrimination in teaching appointments was [passed unanimously at Stormont yesterday](#).

The motion said it was "unacceptable" that teachers should be excluded from protection against discrimination and called on the first minister and deputy first minister to repeal the exemption "urgently".

The NSS welcomed the passage of this motion and called on MLAs to pass the private member's bill, or similar legislation, in response.

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