

Roll back religious privilege in NI education, says NSS

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The National Secular Society has told an education panel in Northern Ireland that removing religious privilege is necessary to ensure inclusivity in schools.

The [Independent Review of Education](#) was established to "identify barriers within the education system which inhibit positive outcomes for children and young people" in NI.

The panel will also consider "the prospects of moving towards a single education system". In NI over 90% of pupils attend religiously segregated schools.

In a [submission](#) to the review's initial survey of public views, the NSS said a single education system is a "long-standing ambition for many" and should be one of the panel's top priorities for systemic reform. It said all schools "should have an integrated, inclusive community – rather than faith specific ethos – suitable and welcoming for families of all backgrounds".

The NSS also submitted more detailed [suggestions for reform](#) in a [letter to the panel](#), including:

- Rolling back religious groups' control of schools by "putting control of education in the hands of accountable organisations", rather than religious groups with vested interests, and reducing the proportion of school governors appointed on religious grounds.
- Tackling the inefficiencies caused by religious segregation in schools and transitioning towards a fully integrated system. The NSS is [supporting a bill](#) in the NI Assembly that would introduce a new duty on the NI executive to support integrated schools.
- Bringing schools in line with equalities legislation by ensuring they cannot discriminate against teachers on religious grounds. The NSS is [backing a bill](#) introduced in the NI Assembly last month that would end this exemption in equality law.
- Modernising education about worldviews. Religious education in NI schools is controlled by religious bodies to a greater extent than anywhere else in the UK. The requirement for RE to promote a Christian ethos has been the subject of a [legal challenge](#).
- Ensuring all aspects of the school day are suitable for all pupils by abolishing the requirement for daily acts of collective worship.
- Modernising relationships and sex education (RSE). NI schools are currently required to develop a curriculum for RSE based on their religious ethos. However, in one study only 66% of pupils said they had received RSE – which is often delivered by external religious groups.

NSS comment

NSS head of education Alastair Lichten said: "The review must respond to the widespread consensus on the need for change, and calls for brave systemic reform.

"This is not a time to rearrange the deckchairs or paper over cracks. Northern Ireland's antiquated and divisive education system must evolve to serve its changing society.

"Many of the issues that need to be addressed have their roots in, or are exacerbated by, sectarian division, and dominance of sectoral bodies acting as barriers to reform.

"If starting from scratch, no one could possibly suggest such a system. We are not able to simply start from scratch, but the independent review is a unique opportunity to disrupt the status quo and challenge the institutional inertia and entrenched interests. We hope this opportunity is seized."

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What the NSS stands for

The Secular Charter outlines 10 principles that guide us as we campaign for a secular democracy which safeguards all citizens' rights to freedom of and from religion.

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