

Faith schools: whose education is it anyway?

Posted: Thu, 6th Mar 2014 by [Stephen Evans](#)

Education policy and practice should focus more on children's independent interests and building a shared society rather than pandering to religious groups motivated by self-preservation, argues NSS campaigns manager, Stephen Evans.

According to a [comprehensive new study](#) undertaken by the Church of England to discover the factors related to spiritual and numerical church growth, our 'National Church' is in decline because generations of church goers are not being replaced.

The Church knows that if people don't start going to church as children they're never likely to go at all. It's not hard to see why the Church of England puts schools at the very centre of its mission.

Unsurprisingly, the study [found](#) (pdf) that being connected with an over-subscribed faith school was helpful for church growth. This is of course down to the [well-established phenomenon](#) of middle-class parents attending church in order to secure a place at their local religiously selective church school. As the maxim goes, "on your knees - avoid the fees".

Interestingly, the report [found](#) (pdf) that Anglican parents aren't passing on religion to their children. When presented with a list of 11 items, which parents might want to pass on to their children, just 11% of Anglicans ticked 'religious belief'.

It is often said that faith schools are popular with parents. Good results courtesy of selective admissions may be appealing to parents, but if Christian parents regarded religion as particularly important, would they not be a little more keen to pass it on to their children? This finding appears to suggest that demand for faith-based schools (or at least Church of England schools) is generated more by religious organisations than parents themselves.

This was certainly the case in Suffolk last year where the National Secular Society [successfully challenged](#) the planned conversion of a community school to a Church of England school on the basis that there was simply no need or parental demand for it. With the local vicar on the school's board of governors, it had all the hallmarks of an 'inside job'.

Approximately one million of the nation's children attend church schools. The Church knows that this is the most effective way, if not only way, for the Church to appear relevant to children and their families.

Put simply, church schools, paid for by the state, are vital to the Church of England's survival, certainly as the established Church.

The question is, to what extent should the state, through our education system, assist the Church in its mission?

At present, it assists it greatly. The Church has its own schools funded by state. It enjoys exemptions from equality law in order to maintain the 'ethos' of its schools. There's a hopelessly antiquated legal requirement for (broadly Christian) daily worship in all schools. The Church also has a grip on religious education that prevents it from becoming the objective study of religion, belief and ethics that it should be. The increasing number of academies and free schools will give

the Church even more control over publicly funded education than ever before.

The Church of England, as with any religious organisation, should of course be free to missionize however it wants, in so far as it doesn't disproportionately impinge on the rights of others.

But by allowing religious organisations to run schools, that is precisely what is happening. Non-churchgoers are discriminated against in admissions to state schools. Teachers are blocked from jobs for not sharing the faith. Young people's right to religious freedom is not being respected in schools. Parents' rights to raise their children in accordance with their own beliefs are being compromised by the imposition of religion in their local schools.

We're told the existence of faith schools creates a 'diversity of provision' that offers 'greater opportunity for parental choice'. But for the non-religious, and those not of the dominant Christian faith, the exact opposite is often true.

Of course, other religious groups have now recognised that having their own schools is the best way to generate their next generation of believers.

Take the Gatton Primary School in Tooting which aims to help its pupils to "develop a love for Allah", or the Madani School in Leicester which aims to "help learners to become confident in their identity as British Muslims with an enduring desire to perform their religious duties." Avanti Hindu schools promise spiritual insight will be achieved through "the singing of the names of the divine, with special (but not exclusive) focus on Krishna."

Pupils at the state funded Yesoday Hatorah Jewish school are even being kept in the dark about key scientific concepts such as human biology and evolution by zealous teachers who use marker pens to [black out questions](#) on science examination papers, denying pupils the right to answer them (at the same time denying them marks) - and all with the government's approval.

By being strictly neutral on religion, schools can ensure their educational provision does not run counter to the religious and philosophical beliefs of parents, and that children from all religion and belief backgrounds are equally welcomed into a shared school environment.

However difficult it may be, the time has come for politicians to start questioning the accepted protocol that governments must acquiesce to demands from religious communities for the state to accommodate and fund their religious schools.

The marketisation of our school system, which rushes to satisfy demands for religious schools, neglects the civic purpose of state education - which should include preparing children for their role as equal citizens of a multicultural, religiously diverse liberal democracy, and encouraging the development of children's autonomy.

However outward looking these schools claim to be, or sometimes aspire to be, you can't escape the fact that they promote segregation along religious and ethnic lines - something which has so often been the root cause of societal enmity and violence.

Its advocacy of faith schools involves the state actively encouraging self-segregation. This is one of the most misguided and pernicious policies of successive governments - apparently still supported by virtually all MPs from all major political parties.

Our elected representatives, either deferential (or perhaps reverential) to religion, or fearful to say anything that might in any way upset local faith leaders, are neglecting to properly consider whether young people's best interests are really served by having a religious affiliation imposed

upon them in the classroom. As a society, we need to consider whether religious inculcation is something public funds should be provided for.

Let's be clear. There's nothing discriminatory or 'anti-religious' about advocating an inclusive secular education system. All religions and beliefs should be treated even-handedly. No school wishing to promote a specifically religious or atheistic ethos would qualify for state funding. All publicly funded schools would be equally welcoming to all children, regardless of their religious and philosophical backgrounds. The objective study of religious and non-religious beliefs and philosophies would form part of the curriculum. And of course, the many teachers motivated by their faith to educate and inspire young people would be equally welcome to do so. It's just that they wouldn't be permitted to use their position to push their religious beliefs on pupils.

It's time education policy and practice focussed more on children's independent interests and building a shared society rather than pandering to religious groups motivated by their insecure need for self-preservation.

This article was first published at [Huffington Post](#).

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