

Teachers shouldn't be the victims of religious discrimination

Posted: Tue, 16th Sep 2014 by [Stephen Evans](#)

The degree to which we tolerate discrimination against teachers in state-funded faith schools would be totally unacceptable in almost all other areas of public life, argues Stephen Evans.

Parents with children at a primary school in East Sussex expressed [outrage](#) this week, when it became clear that the school's popular headteacher, who was drafted in to save the failing primary, could not stay on permanently because he isn't Roman Catholic.

The school of course, is a faith school.

Being a voluntary aided Catholic school, all the staff are employed by the governing body which can apply a religious test in appointing, remunerating and promoting all teachers.

Jon Reynard was called in to improve standards at the school after it was placed in special measures by Ofsted. Parents, who described the head as "fantastic", now want him to stay in post permanently. But the Diocese, which has control over the school's governing body, is keen to replace him with a Catholic.

Defending its position, the Diocese said:

"To maintain the clear Catholic character of Catholic schools the Bishops of England and Wales have stated that the posts of headteacher, deputy headteacher and head of religious education are to be filled by baptised and practising Catholics. The Diocese expects all Catholic schools in the diocese to follow this policy."

As the Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton correctly point out, such a policy is recognised in law.

By any 21st Century standard of equality, the degree of discrimination legally permitted on the grounds of religion and belief against teachers is unreasonable and unacceptable.

These are publicly funded schools we're talking about. Only in the field of education, where religion has somehow managed to maintain its stranglehold over society, would such discrimination still be tolerated.

Surely children's best interests are served by schools recruiting the most suitably qualified teachers and headteachers. It's easy to see how putting religious ethos before the academic success of the school might serve the Church, but it's harder to see how it benefits the pupils – who I would argue, should always be the number one priority.

Of course, some will argue that a distinctive religious ethos is key to academic success. This argument ignores the growing body of [evidence](#) that suggests that what success some faith schools achieve has less to do with "ethos" and more to do with the way in which they can select pupils on the basis of faith – which inadvertently acts as a form of socio-economic selection.

Before the arrival of Mr Reynard, the undersubscribed Catholic Primary School in question was judged to be "inadequate" in virtually all areas. So much for the magical Catholic ethos, then.

I'm not arguing that a school's ethos isn't important. I think it is. But in our publicly funded schools, shouldn't that ethos be built around shared values, equality, inclusiveness and a commitment to excellence?

The school at the centre of this story says its "ultimate concern is to assist all those involved with it in their Journey to God."

Such a self-serving ethos based around the promotion of a religious faith or a religious institution should have no place in a modern public education system.

The extent to which such discrimination is permitted in faith schools in order to maintain this "ethos" is the subject of an ongoing European Commission investigation, with the National Secular Society arguing it breaches European employment laws in relation to discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief.

But it shouldn't take the European Commission to tell us that such discrimination is unjust and ethically wrong and that it shouldn't be allowed to continue.

It's time the law was changed to protect teachers from a form of discrimination that has thankfully been eradicated from almost all other areas of public life.

Stephen Evans

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