

Faith schools add to the angst of school offer day

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National Offer Day is when many parents fall victim to religious discrimination or discover they've been allocated a religious school against their wishes. Stephen Evans argues that a move towards a secular education system might make school offer day a little less fraught.

Anxious parents find out today if their child has managed to get into the primary school of their choice. In some cases, where parents haven't been successful, they may well be the victims of religious discrimination.

Year upon year another tranche of parents discover first-hand some of the injustices that occur when religion and state entwines to educate the nation's children.

In some cases parents will discover that their preferred local school is oversubscribed, and being a faith school has prioritised children whose parents are members of, or who practise, a particular faith – or any faith at all in some cases. The non-religious often have to get to the very back of the queue.

Maybe the successful applicants' parents had their children baptised, perhaps their family dutifully attend church every Sunday. Whatever hoops they've jumped through, they've managed to get the vicar's precious blessing. How ridiculous it is that in modern Britain clergy act as gatekeepers to publicly funded services.

In this way faith schools perpetuate a form of discrimination that simply wouldn't be tolerated in any another area of public life.

An absence of a secularist political framework results in discrimination. The equality law exemptions that make discrimination against children on the grounds of their (or their parents') religion or belief legal in school admissions exist only at the insistence of religious groups to facilitate their schools – for which the taxpayer picks up the bill.

In other cases, where faith-based schools are undersubscribed, the opposite problem often occurs, and children are allocated places at religious school that their parents don't want them to attend.

In recent years the shortage of school places has seen local authorities attempting to place children of non-religious parents in religious schools, children of Christian parents in Sikh schools and in one case a child from a Muslim family was allocated a place in an Orthodox Jewish school.

Both of these vexing issues concerning school admissions have the same solution. A move towards a secular education system would mean no child would be discriminated against on account of their parents' religion or belief. At the same time it would mean no child would ever be compelled to attend a school of a different religious tradition to their own, or their parents'.

It would of course mean that parents would have to take responsibility for their child's religious upbringing – but that really is their responsibility anyway, rather than the state's.

And wouldn't it be better all-round if our publicly funded schools educated children of all faith backgrounds together and stuck to promoting the societal values we share without trying to stick religious labels on either those values or the children they teach?

This should be done as a matter of principle, but an end to faith schools and the resulting discrimination might also make school offer day a little less fraught than it currently is.

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