

Facilitating more religious segregation in faith schools can only harm social cohesion

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In a move devoid of any common sense, Theresa May's government looks set to capitulate to the demands of religious groups by relaxing admissions rules for faith-based academies, allowing them to select all pupils along religious lines.

It's hard to think of a more retrograde policy than the facilitation of greater religious segregation of children and young people in our education system.

What are we to make of the Government's warnings about schoolchildren from minority religious backgrounds having little or no understanding of others, when their policies seem destined to exacerbate exactly that?

Only last year the schools minister Lord Nash said the Government had "no plans to review the 50% limit for faith-based admissions to free schools", describing the cap as "an important way of supporting these schools to be inclusive and to meet the needs of a broad mix of families".

So what changed?

Part of the answer may lie in the fact that 900,000 new school places will be needed in England by 2024.

The free schools initiative was originally hailed as a parent and teacher-led 'schools revolution', but as it turns out, parents don't really have the time, expertise or inclination to open their own schools.

Only a tiny proportion of new schools are being set up by parent groups, most are being established by multi-academy chains and faith groups. The success of free schools policy very much relies on school sponsors coming forward - and until now the Catholic Church has been reluctant to do so, rejecting limitations on the extent to which it can discriminate against non-Catholics. It insists that the public money it receives to run schools should be spent on providing schools to serve only people of the Catholic faith.

It's clear that this latest proposal to relax admissions arrangements follows relentless lobbying from religious organisations urging the Government to remove the 50% cap. But by rushing to satisfy the demands of faith-based education providers, the Government risks recklessly neglecting the civic purpose of state education - which surely includes preparing children for their role as equal citizens of a multicultural, religiously diverse liberal democracy.

In a society as diverse as ours, rather than facilitating segregation along religious lines, the Government should be doing everything it can to ensure that children of all faiths and none are educated together in inclusive schools.

Allowing faith schools to apply 100% discrimination is a gargantuan step in the wrong direction - and the dangers are clear.

In David Cameron's Birmingham speech on countering extremism, the former prime minister said:

"It cannot be right... that people can grow up and go to school and hardly ever come into meaningful contact with people from other backgrounds and faiths. That doesn't foster a sense of shared belonging and understanding - it can drive people apart."

The Government's horribly muddled thinking over faith schools is illustrated by its own guidance on '[promoting fundamental British values](#)' in schools. On one hand it calls it "unacceptable" for schools to "promote discrimination against people or groups on the basis of their belief, opinion or background" yet at the same time seems content to allow them to do just that with regard to their admissions arrangements.

It's hard to see how schools can effectively teach "mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs" if they don't even want kids with different faiths and beliefs in their schools.

Perhaps it's only years further down the line that we'll be able to fully assess the damage religious schooling causes to the social fabric of British society, but the warning signs are already there.

A look across the Irish Sea also provides valuable lessons that politicians would do well to learn.

Only recently the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child [rebuked the UK](#) over the way Northern Ireland's education system still separates children along religious lines. The UN called on the UK to do more to promote integrated education, but here we are going in the opposite direction, allowing yet more segregation.

In the long-term the only real solution is to phase out faith schools and replace them with inclusive secular schools where people of all faiths and none can be educated together. Unfortunately, we're still heading in the wrong direction.

Despite Britain being one of the most secularised countries in the world, one third of all schools in England and Wales are faith schools, with an increasing number of minority faith schools opening, further fragmenting state education along religious and ethnic lines. A proliferation of faith-based schools may serve the needs of organised religion, but they will fail children, be bad for communities, and bad for Britain. The Government should think again.

Stephen Evans is the campaigns director of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS. Follow him on Twitter [@Stephenmevans1](#)

The Government is currently consulting on allowing new faith free schools to select up to 100% of pupils based on their faith. Please [take part in the consultation](#), and urge the Government to end discrimination and segregation in faith schools - not extend it.

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