

Intolerant religion mustn't dictate England's education policy

Posted: Wed, 26th Jul 2017 by [Stephen Evans](#)

The government is under fire over proposals to lift the cap on faith-based admissions in faith schools. Stephen Evans says the plans should be abandoned - and religious groups' role in education rolled back.

Following [criticism of the government's divisive plans](#) to drop the faith-based admissions cap to faith-based free schools, hopes were raised this week that the plans may be aborted.

This remains to be seen, but a common response I receive when discussing the government's proposals is 'why on earth would they want to do that in the first place?'

The fact the proposals were '[warmly welcomed](#)' by the Catholic Church gives you a clue.

The changes were lobbied for by the Church, which is stubbornly refusing to open new schools unless it can apply 100% faith selection. The Church says the existing 50% cap prevents the Church from "meeting the demand from Catholic parents for Catholic places". The Church says that to turn Catholic families away on the grounds that they are Catholics would "contravene Canon Law".

But government policy should no more be dictated by canon 'law' than it should be by sharia 'law'. Whether such a canon exists anyway is a [matter of some dispute](#), but it is of course nonsense to suggest that anyone would be 'forced away' because they are Catholic. Unlucky applicants would be turned away due to lack of spaces, following the implementation of a reasonable admissions policy based on criteria other than whether parents have had their child baptised.

Someone else keen to see the cap removed is Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis. A spokesman for his office said that the value of Jewish schools lay in providing "[a completely immersive Jewish environment](#) - something which is far more challenging if the 50 per cent rule associated with free schools is applied."

Well, precisely. The whole point of the cap is to allow faith schools "to support inclusivity and tolerance" while preventing segregation.

The government says it wants to "ensure young people leave school prepared for life in modern Britain". How can it possibly square that with a policy that will allow children to be schooled in a 'completely immersive' religious environment, surrounded by pupils of the same faith and, in many cases, the same ethnic background?

The state has a duty to provide schools. It does not have a duty to provide faith schools. The demand from religious groups for the state to provide education wholly on religious parents' terms is an unreasonable and divisive demand which needs to be resisted.

Rather than facilitating segregation along religious lines under the mantra of 'choice', the government should be straining every sinew to ensure that children of all faiths and none are educated together in inclusive schools.

This requires a bold shift in policy direction. A good start would be to ditch the divisive plans to drop the 50% admissions cap. But the government needs to go beyond that and re-evaluate the wisdom of supporting faith-based education.

It is no longer good enough for the government to point to the church's 'long history of providing education in this country'. The UK's religious landscape has changed dramatically in recent decades, and as we become more diverse as a country we risk becoming more divided. Education policy is the golden opportunity to address this. The cosy relationship between church and state is preventing this opportunity from being grasped.

It is estimated that around 900,000 new school places will be needed in England by 2024. It is a sorry state of affairs that the Government is reliant on the Catholic Church to provide these. The ailing Church of England is of course [eager to step up to the plate](#), but despite all its talk of 'inclusivity', these overtly Christian schools, with their worship and insidious indoctrination, can no longer serve the whole community.

Other solutions need to be found. Perhaps we need to allow local authorities to open schools. Let's look to the model established by [Educate Together](#), an NGO that runs schools that guarantee equality of access and esteem to children "irrespective of their social, cultural or religious background". One thing is clear, the state should no longer look to religion to find the answers to education.

The time has come to strip organised religion of the privilege of being allowed to act as gatekeepers to publicly funded services. Unfair religiously discriminatory admissions arrangements need to be consigned to history and the whole role of religion in modern schooling re-evaluated.

A rethink of the fully segregated faith schools proposal would be a start. But only a start.

This blog was originally published by the [Huffington Post](#).

Stephen Evans

Stephen is the CEO of the National Secular Society. You can follow him on Twitter [@stephenmevans1](#). The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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