

The government's U-turn shows the tide is turning against faith schools

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The decision not to allow more faith-based admissions to new free schools in England is a big win, says Stephen Evans. But the expansion of faith schools is the wrong response to Britain's growing religious diversity.

The government's U-turn on its manifesto promise to lift the 50% cap on faith-based admissions to new religious free schools is a positive development – and a significant win for secularists who have vigorously opposed the measure.

The cap on faith admissions to new academies was introduced "to support inclusivity and tolerance" and remains the only tangible action the government has taken to tackle the discrimination and segregation wrought by faith schools. The government is right to backtrack on this controversial policy proposal and keep this limited measure in place.

But what the government gives with one hand, it takes away with the other. Instead of scrapping the cap on free school faith admissions, the education secretary, Damian Hinds, has sought to appease religious lobby groups by making it easier for faith groups to open new voluntary-aided faith schools, which can select 100% of pupils on faith grounds.

Encouraging more voluntary-aided schools is a regressive step and a back-door attempt to expand faith school education and increase the number of school places allocated on the basis of faith.

Voluntary-aided schools are almost exclusively run by religious groups, predominantly the Catholic Church. In addition to imposing religious criteria on all pupil admissions, governing bodies can also unjustifiably apply a religious test on all teaching positions.

What's more, rather than providing broad and balanced religious education, voluntary-aided schools teach an archaic confessional kind of RE in accordance with the teachings of the religion of the school. A recent investigation into sex and relationships education in faith schools also found that many voluntary-aided faith schools are [failing to provide pupils with clear and accurate information](#).

The expansion of faith schools is the wrong response to Britain's growing religious diversity. Parents must of course be free to raise their children within a faith tradition, but the expectation to do so via state-funded education is an unreasonable one that needs to be resisted.

Schools provide a golden opportunity to bring pupils and parents from different faith backgrounds together. An education system that tackles division and promotes inclusivity and equality should be a priority for education ministers. If the government is serious about promoting fundamental values and social cohesion, it cannot afford its current equivocal approach.

Schools that divide children along lines of faith to indoctrinate them must make way for secular and inclusive schools in which children have the chance to learn from each other's differences and enjoy the freedom to develop their own beliefs, free from undue religious influence.

The ministerial volte-face on the admissions cap is perhaps a sign that the tide is turning against faith schools. The government says it expects all proposers of new faith schools to promote integration and inclusivity – but surely it realises that the very concept of faith-based education is inimical to that?

Unlike with free schools, which are approved nationally by the secretary of state, local authorities will play a key role in approving any new voluntary aided school. This is good news for democratic accountability. Local residents should insist that the schools that serve their communities bring children together and don't turn them away simply because they're not baptised or their parents aren't sufficiently pious. Any local authority that plans to open a discriminatory faith school can expect opposition every step of the way.

This piece was originally published in [the Huffington Post](#). It is reprinted here with kind permission.

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