

We must find the political will to end discriminatory school admissions

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As families in England prepare to find out which primary schools their children will attend, Alastair Lichten says ending faith-based discrimination would make the admissions system fairer and simpler.

This Friday is primary school offer day in England. It comes in the middle of a few months where families of around 600,000 pupils across the UK will find out where they'll be attending school next academic year. There will be joy, relief and frustration for many.

And for large numbers the day will confirm they are the victim of the most pervasive form of legal [faith-based discrimination in the UK](#). These families will miss out on places at their local schools thanks to faith schools' religious selection criteria.

The extent of religious discrimination in primary school admissions varies widely between different school types and individual schools. [Estimates](#) suggest 17% of primary school places in England are subject to religious selection, affecting well over 100,000 families a year. This includes people like Zoe from Wolverhampton, who [told us via a petition](#): "*I live right by a school (2 min walk) I would like my daughter to go to. But as we are not a religious family, I'm told she can't go there, and will now have to drive my child to school as the others are 5-10 minutes' drive.*"

These 17% of school places are not evenly distributed. Many faith schools operate a mix of open and selective admissions, while others can select up to 100% of their pupils based on religion. This discrimination affects people like Jonathan from Warrington who said: "*My child is at the bottom of the list for our local primary school just because we are not part of any religious group.*"

Faith based admissions can lead to [absurd demands](#) being placed on parents, and it is [well established](#) that they lead to ethnic and socioeconomic selection. The [complexity](#) of admissions also confuses families and makes it harder to assess the impact of faith-based discrimination.

It's time politicians faced up to the [damaging message](#) that permitting religious discrimination sends to our children. For example, Charandeep from North London told us: "*As a British born Sikh, the first time I felt excluded by society was when applying for primary schools. Despite having faith and regularly attending our local temple, my children were excluded.*"

Even among those with a range of views on faith schools, there is a lot of consensus over discriminatory admissions. Few people are willing to support religious selection. Even the faith school groups that do feel the need to [obfuscate](#) and dress this up in euphemism, such as claiming that pupils of all faiths are 'welcome to apply'. [Various surveys](#) in recent years have put support at only [15%](#) or [17%](#) among the public, and [18%](#) among teachers.

The government promised a [national review into school admissions](#) in 2017 – but we've been waiting for it for almost four years. But rather than stand with the majority who support inclusive admissions, politicians continue to pander to the faith school lobby. Most recently, schools minister Nick Gibb [signalled](#) that the government is potentially open to removing the cap on religious

discrimination in admissions to new academies. This would make it far easier to open faith schools with potentially total religious selection.

Politicians should go in the opposite direction. Ending faith schools, or at least the [Equality Act exemptions](#) which permit discriminatory admissions, would make the admissions system fairer and simpler. In the meantime, we need to call out discrimination for what it is and shame the politicians who give this practice their support or acquiescence.

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Alastair ([@AlastairLichten](#)) is the head of education at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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