

# In defence of equality in Birmingham schools

As a group of individuals and organisations, we express our solidarity with the head teachers, staff and parents of children at Parkfield and Anderton primary schools in Birmingham and those elsewhere that are struggling against the onslaught of religious fundamentalist forces. In the face of a fierce and well-orchestrated campaign mounted by Islamists (and supported by other fundamentalist and right-wing forces), we defend their courageous struggle to deliver an inclusive education curriculum based on the principles of acceptance, equality and humanity.

The protestors claim that aspects of the schools' curriculums are incompatible with their religious beliefs. They have used misinformation, intimidation, harassment and abuse to generate fear and to impose their bigoted and homophobic world views on others. We reject their tactics and we reject their claim to speak on behalf of minorities or represent 'community values'. Many parents from minority communities do not subscribe to their fundamentalist vision, they struggle on a daily basis to give their children – boys and girls – educational opportunities that they never had. They struggle to protect their children from a range of inequalities – racism, sexism, and homophobia – and they believe, as do we that equality and freedom depend on access to education and knowledge.

'Parent power' has become a key tool used by conservative and fundamentalist forces to curtail what is taught within schools and to withdraw children from those aspects of the curriculum that do not align with their views. Rather than challenge their anti-equality agenda and fight for children and young people's right to a full and comprehensive education, some local councillors and MPs are ready to extinguish their rights in order to bolster and appease their own vote banks. The leaders of all the main political parties have also been completely silent. But silence is impunity.

We will not allow fundamentalists of any hue to hijack the education system. This is not about liberal values versus religious values but about those who support equality for all and those who do not. This is not about religious freedom but about the politics of hatred, division and violence. This is not about minority rights but about fundamentalist bids for power and control over people and resources.

We urge all those who care about education to speak up and defend the teaching of equality in schools everywhere. We call upon the government to defend without reservation the right of schools to teach an inclusive school curriculum; to promote equality and age-appropriate sex and relationships education for all children and young people; and to properly fund and support state schools to deliver a secular, egalitarian and accessible education for all.

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