

Bonus Ep 5: Academies report

<https://www.secularism.org.uk/podcast/2020/10/36a>

0:00:06.520,0:00:08.240

(Emma Park, EP): Welcome to the 5th bonus episode

0:00:08.440,0:00:12.400

of the National Secular Society podcast hosted by Emma Park. The NSS

0:00:12.550,0:00:16.000

has just released a report about religious influence on schools called

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'Power Grab: Academisation and the Threat to Secular Education'.

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I'm joined now by Alastair Lichten, Head of Education at the NSS,

0:00:23.840,0:00:27.360

to discuss the purpose of the report and its key findings.

0:00:27.560,0:00:30.880

Alastair, first of all, what was the purpose of this report?

0:00:31.080,0:00:32.360

(Alastair Lichten, AL): Well, morning, Emma.

0:00:32.560,0:00:37.040

So, for many years, the National Secular Society has been one

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of the few organisations really raising alarm over the fact

0:00:41.760,0:00:45.440

that through academisation - that's the process by which schools

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in England become released from local authority control and become academies -

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now that has led to a big increase in religious governance and religious

0:00:55.200,0:00:58.760

control, including within non-faith schools.

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We've raised specific examples and some of those are talked about in the report.

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So, for example, nine schools in one area

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joined together to become an academy trust

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and because one of them was a faith

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school, that becomes a faith based academy trust.

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We've tried over the years to get

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clarification and information from the Department For Education about this issue

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and we've just been stymied at almost every turn.

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So, the Department Of Education say, oh, they don't know which academy trusts

0:01:28.560,0:01:32.720
have a religious ethos or we asked
them which academy trusts are mixed? -

0:01:32.920,0:01:35.680
that's containing a mix of faith and non-faith
schools -

0:01:35.880,0:01:40.520
and they get back to us with inconsistent
or strange information.

0:01:40.720,0:01:42.120
So with this report,

0:01:42.320,0:01:47.240
we decided just to sit down and to just
try and work out, based on model funding

0:01:47.440,0:01:50.760
agreements and the information that was
available about schools,

0:01:50.960,0:01:55.480
which schools which have become academies
or new academies are in which trusts

0:01:55.680,0:02:00.720
and which are those are religious or not.
(EP): Talking of these trusts ,

0:02:00.920,0:02:02.520
now your report looked at a range

0:02:02.520,0:02:05.800
of schools which had been absorbed
into these multi-academy trusts.

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Just quickly, what is
the significance of this structure?

0:02:09.760,0:02:12.640
Well, it can be very confusing for parents

0:02:12.840,0:02:16.880
in England that there are quite
a range of different types of schools.

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(AL): So traditionally, we had three main types
in England which were voluntary

0:02:22.100,0:02:25.200
controlled, voluntary aided -
those with different types of faith

0:02:25.400,0:02:29.480
schools - and community schools,
which were non-faith schools.

0:02:29.680,0:02:31.640
We also had, you know,
things like foundation

0:02:31.840,0:02:37.240
schools and some other small, strange,
strange models. Through academisation,

0:02:37.440,0:02:40.880
what happens is that the school is no longer
controlled by the local authority,

0:02:41.080,0:02:44.440
but is controlled by an independent
organisation called a Trust

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and they can be modeled along the same,
similar

0:02:47.760,0:02:51.560
lines to a voluntary control or voluntary aided
school or could be a faith school or

0:02:51.760,0:02:56.880
could be a community ethos in that they
have no specific religious designation.

0:02:57.080,0:03:00.200
(EP): What were the key findings of your
report?

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(AL): We found that more than 2600 non-faith academies - those academies that shouldn't have

0:03:06.800,0:03:10.320
a faith ethos or designation,
and that's actually almost half

0:03:10.520,0:03:15.000
of the academies, of non-faith academies
in multi-academy trusts, were actually in
trusts

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that had some form or likely have
some form of religious governance.

0:03:19.520,0:03:23.480
This is several thousand schools,
which you would think would be just run

0:03:23.650,0:03:27.600
along entirely secular lines and would
have no special religious input, in fact,

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potentially having policies
dictated by religious appointees.

0:03:33.640,0:03:37.880
We also found
that two hundred and sixty five former

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community schools had, since academisation,
acquired a faith ethos or designation.

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(EP): In other words, schools which were
previously non-denominational at all,

0:03:50.520,0:03:54.680
had become more religious. Does that mean
overall that more schools are now,

0:03:54.880,0:03:57.040
have some religious
influence than used to?

0:03:57.240,0:03:59.520
(AL): Yes, but it's no longer enough just to see

0:03:59.640,0:04:02.120
whether or not the school
itself has a faith basis,

0:04:02.130,0:04:05.280
you also need to look at the trust
within which it operates.

0:04:05.480,0:04:07.160
So you could have a school which describes

0:04:07.360,0:04:12.200
itself and operates on a day to day basis
as a non-faith or community ethos school,

0:04:12.400,0:04:16.520
but still has some policies which are
decided by religious appointees.

0:04:16.720,0:04:19.920
(EP): Let's look at those um, appointees
and let's look at the different ways

0:04:20.120,0:04:23.560
in which religious groups and individuals
can influence these schools.

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So first of all, there's the governors
of the school and the trustees.

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How might they be influenced by religious
organizations? (AL): On a day to day basis,

0:04:32.880,0:04:35.280
the governance structure of a school

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can seem somewhat disconnected from what
happens in the school on any given day,

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but these things do influence policy

over a longer period of time.

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One of the case studies in the report that we looked at was

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a non faith, a community ethos school, which is part of a faith-based multi-academy

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trust, and since it became part of that trust, policy dictated

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that the collective worship requirement was enforced much more stringently.

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When you have people, the people in the room making the decision,

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and those can be decisions, can be very, quite routine or could be profound

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and really go to the heart of the ethos of the school,

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in a non-faith and a community ethos school, you'd expect those people to be appointed in a,

0:05:18.440,0:05:22.320

either democratically or meritoriously. You wouldn't expect them and

0:05:22.520,0:05:26.880

you shouldn't expect them to be promoted based on their faith ethos.

0:05:27.080,0:05:30.520

(EP): And what you're saying is that now a lot more of these governors and trustees are

0:05:30.720,0:05:34.720

being appointed because of their religious affiliations?

0:05:34.920,0:05:37.600

(AL): Yes, potentially, although it is - as we say in the report -

0:05:37.790,0:05:40.440

it is very difficult to find that, just

0:05:40.640,0:05:44.280

to find these things out, to find out how many people are appointed

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by, particularly dioceses and boards of education.

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(EP): Well, let's talk now about

0:05:49.640,0:05:53.200

the designation or ethos of the school. Overall,

0:05:53.200,0:05:54.840

would you say that schools have

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become more religious in other ways as well since they became academies, not just

0:05:59.280,0:06:02.960

in terms of the governance structure, but in other ways on a day-to-day level?

0:06:03.160,0:06:07.120

You mentioned collective worship - are there other examples as well?

0:06:07.320,0:06:12.160

(AL):So, it's kind of a hallmark of schools which don't have a religious designation,

0:06:12.160,0:06:14.440

a community ethos, that they are much more likely

0:06:14.640,0:06:20.760
to interpret the collective worship
requirement more broadly and to almost

0:06:20.960,0:06:25.400
interpret it out of existence as schools
to be more likely to hold simply inclusive

0:06:25.600,0:06:31.120
assemblies that provide opportunity
for worship but don't dictate it. When you

0:06:31.320,0:06:35.600
have trust-wide policies promoting
collective worship that can affect all

0:06:35.800,0:06:39.360
schools in the trust.
Non-faith, community ethos schools are

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expected to teach locally
determined religious education.

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But if you have at a trust level deciding
what, what textbooks are going to be

0:06:48.000,0:06:50.760
bought, what
professional career development

0:06:50.960,0:06:55.480
opportunities are going to be for teachers
that can also influence then how it's

0:06:55.680,0:07:00.120
delivered, even if it is technically
still non-denominational.

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There's also the issue of voluntary

0:07:02.640,0:07:05.400
controlled faith schools,
and I don't really want to get deeply

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into terminology and differences,
but many people

0:07:09.840,0:07:14.640
have an experience and think about
voluntary controlled faith schools,

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which are Church of England schools
typically, as being much more light-touch,

0:07:20.520,0:07:22.800
maybe a sort of a halfway house between

0:07:23.000,0:07:26.360
some of the more strict faith
schools and community schools.

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However, through academisation,
we're seeing that difference between

0:07:31.200,0:07:34.520
voluntary-controlled and voluntary-aided
faith schools diminish.

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And once a faith school,
a voluntary controlled faith school,

0:07:38.160,0:07:41.960
which previously may have had a degree
of independence from the diocese,

0:07:42.160,0:07:46.320
once it's forced into and has no choice
about what trust it goes into,

0:07:46.520,0:07:50.240
it's forced into a multi-academy trust backed
by the diocese,

0:07:50.440,0:07:53.280
that's a much tighter
level of control over it

0:07:53.400,0:07:55.480
and therefore, that's one of the many ways

0:07:55.680,0:07:59.400

in which, particularly Church of England, who controls VC faith schools are

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attempting to increase the rigor of their

0:08:01.480,0:08:06.400

religious ethos. (EP): In your view Alastair, what needs to be done to counter

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what seems to be a resurgence in religious influence in schools?

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(AL): The report makes a number

0:08:12.920,0:08:16.840

of recommendations for both national and local policymakers

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and we will be writing both to the Department

0:08:19.960,0:08:23.320

For Education and regional School Commissioners.

0:08:23.520,0:08:25.560

Ultimately, if we want to protect

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community ethos education, then we need to start taking it seriously.

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There are whole mechanisms in place

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to protect faith schools' ethos, but the D.F.E. have shown time and time again

0:08:36.320,0:08:39.280

that they simply don't value

or take seriously enough

0:08:39.400,0:08:40.760

the protection of community school ethos.

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It's unsurprising because

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the faith school lobby is very well organized and there's not a comparable

0:08:47.920,0:08:52.280

lobby for protecting non-faith or community ethos schools.

0:08:52.480,0:08:55.560

(EP): What can members do if they feel strongly about this?

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(AL): It would be great if supporters in England

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could share the report with their, with their MPs -

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we've got a facility on our website

0:09:02.160,0:09:05.680

and we'll link it in the show notes - to start with a template letter.

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If you're affected by any of the issues in this report,

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so, for example, if you work in or are a governor or a parent

0:09:13.240,0:09:18.680

who attends a non-faith school that is being forced into a faith-based multi-academy trust

0:09:18.880,0:09:22.720

or you have religious governance in your academy trust

0:09:22.880,0:09:24.880
despite it not containing any

0:09:25.080,0:09:31.720
faith schools or, you know, even if you are involved in a faith school which values

0:09:31.810,0:09:35.760
its independence and doesn't want to be promoting a very strict religious ethos

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but you feel you are being forced into that through academisation,

0:09:39.240,0:09:42.960
then definitely get in touch and we'd be happy to support you.

0:09:43.160,0:09:46.560
I'd also, as I might always say,

0:09:46.760,0:09:50.600
if you, if you're interested in this report and you support the work of the NSS,

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then please do join or donate.
Reports like this and original research.

0:09:56.920,0:10:00.920
and the time that goes into providing casework support for the people affected

0:10:01.120,0:10:06.040
is hugely time consuming, but we think very valuable.

0:10:06.240,0:10:07.560
(EP): Alastair Lichten, thank you very much.

0:10:07.760,0:10:09.200
(AL): Thanks.

0:10:15.880,0:10:18.680

(EP): This episode was produced by the National Secular Society.

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Thanks for listening and I hope you can join us next time.