



BRIEFING:

Faith-based restrictions on school choice

Faith schools are often justified in terms of choice however, state-funded faith schools impede choice for many families. Many are forced into faith schools due to the high proportion of faith schools and lack of secular provision, particularly in many areas. Others are unable to access local schools due to religiously selective admissions. Increasing religious diversity and irreligiosity will only exacerbate the situation. The [choice delusion](#) project provides research on the extent of these problems and support for those affected.

Local authority scorecard

In 2018, our ground-breaking Choice Delusion report revealed how faith schools restrict school choice across England.

From 2021 our new Local authority scorecard enabled policymakers and the public to see how faith schools restrict choice in each local authority. It features an analysis of almost half a million postcodes, along with the latest admissions data, providing an unprecedented level of detail.

This is via a [downloadable spreadsheet](#), where users can select their local authority to see a detailed breakdown of the impact of faith schools’ restricting choice, compare these to national figures and the overall performance of other local authorities. Our data is the best available estimate, as the government has confirmed that they have no figures for this data.

Findings

[The report](#) states that 30% have little or no choice but a faith-based primary school

We looked at the three nearest primary schools in 486,177 postcodes across England, allowing us to project at the national, local authority and postal sector level the restrictions on the option of a non-faith (i.e., secular or community ethos) school.

Restriction	Faith based local	Localities (%) schools
None	0/3	28.8
Low	1/3	40.9
High	2/3	23.6
Extreme	3/3	6.7

In each of the three worst-performing authorities by this measure, more than four in five families live in areas of high or extreme restriction:

	Low	High	Extreme
Westminster	11.0	17.5	69.4
City of London	3.3	80.5	16.2
Wigan	18.0	59.5	21.9

10% have little or no choice but a faith-based secondary school

These figures are also available for secondary schools:

Restriction	Faith-based local	Localities (%) schools
None	0/3	52.9
Low	1/3	36.8
High	2/3	9.1
Extreme	3/3	1.2

In each of the three worst-performing authorities by this measure, more than six in ten families live in areas of high or extreme restriction:

	Low	High	Extreme
Westminster	5.8	44.7	49.1
Kensington and Chelsea	25.0	40.5	33.0
Liverpool	39.1	49.1	10.0

20,792 pupils are assigned to faith schools against their own or parents’ preferences.

Since 2014, over 153,000 pupils have been assigned to faith schools despite a nonfaith preference.

2021 marks the third consecutive September whereby more than 20,000 pupils were assigned to a faith school despite their families expressing a preference for a non-faith option.

Local authorities can be ranked by the total number of assigned faith schools against preferences (1085 pupils in Kent), or the proportion of applications (11.1% of pupils in Kensington and Chelsea).

37% of primary and 19% of secondary schools are faith-based.

Faith schools are expanding with extremely limited transparency, consultation, or evidence of need. This localised information will support communities pushing for more non-faith options and challenging new faith school proposals.

Do faith schools provide choice?

The idea of faith schools providing extra choice in the debate over faith schools misrepresents the issues facing families. Research has consistently displayed that religious ethos, is the least principal factor in school choice. Location and academic standards have far greater influence.

Faith schools create division in the education system, a narrow concept of 'choice' ignores this completely and disregards the division faith-based education creates.

The harm caused by religious discrimination in school admissions and exclusionary ethos extends beyond the restrictions of choice and legitimizes wider prejudices in society.

Our policy recommendations

- The Department for Education should monitor faith-based restrictions on school choice and suitability across England.
- A legal entitlement for all families to have reasonable access to a non-faith (community-ethos) school.
- Local authorities should ensure adequate school provision should include monitoring faith-based restrictions on school choice and suitability and prioritising addressing these in decisions about amalgamations or new provisions.
- Faith-based discrimination in admissions should be phased out, starting in areas of significant restrictions on school choice.

- A moratorium should be introduced on the opening of new faith-based schools. This could be phased in starting in the areas with the highest faith-based restrictions on school choice and suitability.
- It should be easier for faith schools to lose or downgrade their religious designation, particularly in areas where they are contributing to high faith-based restrictions on school choice or are significantly unrepresentative of their local communities.

Campaign: what can you do?

[Contact your MP](#) to express your objections to faith based restrictions in schools. Writing to your MP is a fantastic way to get our message across.

- Scan social media such as Twitter and the wider internet for any articles about undue faith-based restrictions on school choice.
- The local media are also always looking for stories, particularly those with a specific community angle. Taking part in radio phone-ins and writing letters to the local paper is a fantastic way of making sure a secularist point of view is heard.
- Case studies form a powerful part of our campaigns.

Who supports the campaign?

- A wide and diverse range of parents, teachers, and individuals support this campaign, based on shared values of fairness and equality.
- Find out more about our range of [supporters](#) and their experiences with school choices.

Get in touch

We offer advice on education-related issues for pupils, parents, and teachers related to school admissions, evangelism in schools, withdrawing from collective worship and issues with religious education.

For more information on this issue please visit our campaign page. If you have any questions or need advice, please contact our education team via education@secularism.org.uk

Though this issue is a problem across all four UK nations, the different ways in which data on schools and admissions are recorded mean that the methodology for these figures can only be used for England.