

April 2020

Comprehensively Fair: NSS consultation response

Submitted by email to: contact-us@suttontrust.com and via online form.¹

1. This submission is made by the National Secular Society (NSS). The NSS is a not-for-profit non-governmental organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. We advocate for separation of religion and state and promote secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. We seek a diverse society where all are free to practise their faith, change it, or to have no faith at all. We uphold the universality of individual Human Rights, which should never be overridden on the grounds of religion, tradition or culture.

1. Does your school consider socio-economic background in your admissions policy? (If so, how does it do this?)

2. We are not a school, but campaigning for fair and equitable school admissions is one of our key areas of interest.
3. The National Secular Society works for the separation of religion and state, and for equal respect for everyone's human rights so that no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs. We regard secularism and equality as essential features of a fair and open society. This includes within education.

2. What kind of barriers does your school face in improving the socio-economic diversity of its intake?

4. The most egregious and unnecessary barrier that schools face in improving the socio-economic diversity of their intake, in addition to the ethnic and religion/belief diversity of their intake, are admissions policies that allow schools to discriminate against pupils on the basis of the religion/belief of their families.
5. When oversubscribed, schools with a designated religious character ('faith schools') are permitted to prioritise children from families who follow the religion of the school over other children in their admissions. They are also allowed to prioritise children of families of any religion over those of no religion. Voluntary aided schools and many academies designated as having a religious character are able to give priority for up to 100% of their places on faith-based admissions criteria.
6. Such discrimination would ordinarily be unlawful according to the Equality Act 2010. But faith schools are granted exceptions to the Act, which makes it lawful for them to discriminate against, harass or victimise a pupil or potential pupil.
7. The Sutton Trust's own research in this area is extensive and convincingly demonstrates that selecting pupils on religion or belief leads to a worsening of socio-economic diversity. Its 2016

¹ <https://www.suttontrust.com/schools-consultation/>

analysis primary schools by Dr Rebecca Allen and Dr Meenakshi Parameshwaran found that over 1500 schools in England are “highly socially selective” and that Catholic faith schools are particularly selective in their intake:²

- a. – “It is generally true that non-religious schools are not particularly socially selective and that Roman Catholic and other religious primary schools are, regardless of governance status”
 - b. – “...socially selective primary schools are more likely to be found in London and other urban areas. They are often schools with a religious character who have chosen to apply religious oversubscription criteria.”
 - c. - “Socially selective primary schools tend to use lengthy and more complex oversubscription criteria to decide who is allocated a place. These criteria can be complex for parents to navigate.” Faith schools are able to use particularly complex oversubscription criteria when allocating places, and one school was found to be using 18 different criteria.
8. Furthermore, in 2013 the Sutton Trust found 6% of all parents with a child at a state school admitted to attending church services specifically to get their child into a faith school, with wealthier families more likely to do this.³
 9. Faith schools also lead to ethnic segregation. The government’s own data from 2016 found in free schools designated for minority faiths in the English school system (Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and Hinduism) the intake has been predominantly of pupils from similar ethnic backgrounds.⁴
 10. In 2018 our ground breaking report - *The choice delusion: how faith schools restrict primary school choice in England*⁵ - showed that
 - a. Almost three in ten families across England live in areas where most or all of the closest primary schools are faith schools.
 - b. Every year between 45,000 – 60,000 families apply for primary schools in areas with extreme restrictions on non-faith school choice.
 11. While this report did not directly address the impact on socio-economic diversity/selection, it is reasonable to presume that less socio-economically advantaged families would be particularly impacted, given the complexity of school admissions processes and additional transport time/costs which can be imposed when your nearest school is not an option.

3. In your view, what would be the best way to improve socio-economic diversity in comprehensive schools? (e.g. random ballots, banding tests, prioritising pupil premium or other methods.)

12. Schools should no longer be permitted to discriminate on the grounds of religion/belief in admissions. The Equality Act should be amended to ensure that no publicly funded school is

² <https://www.slideshare.net/SirPeterLamp/the-sutton-trusts-caught-out-research-april-2016>

³ <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/30277/1/1parentpower-final.pdf>

⁴ https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-frameworks/schools-that-work-for-everyone/supporting_documents/SCHOOLS%20THAT%20WORK%20FOR%20EVERYONE%20%20FINAL.PDF

⁵ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/the-choice-delusion-how-faith-schools-restrict-primary-school-choice-in-england.pdf>

permitted to prioritise pupils in admissions on the basis of baptism, religious affiliation or the religious activities of a child's parent(s).

13. While socio-economic diversity is not explicitly within our purview, we have argued that as faith selective/discriminatory schools are usually planned around larger than average catchment areas, ending religious selection would provide opportunities for local experimentation to promote inclusion, diversity and community cohesion.

4. Please provide any further comments. We are particularly interested in hearing from schools, local authorities and multi-academy trusts who have improved the socio-economic balance of their schools.

14. We collect case studies⁶, examples⁷ and quotes⁸ from families who have been affected by discriminatory policies in their local faith schools and would be happy to share examples with The Sutton Trust.

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⁶ <https://www.nomorefaithschools.org/news/2020/04/discrimination-inconvenience-unfairness-the-harm-caused-by-faith-school-admissions>

⁷ <https://www.nomorefaithschools.org/testimonials.html>

⁸ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/faith-schools/choice-delusion-parents-perspective.html>