

BRIEFING:

The faith schools research bank

Over a third of schools in Britain are faith schools, yet their place within public education systems remains deeply contested. Proponents of faith schools claim that they improve parental choice, achieve superior educational outcomes, and are better at promoting moral values. Critics, and the evidence, strongly contests these claims. However, research on faith schools is often piecemeal and difficult to access, making it hard to gain a comprehensive view of the debate.

The **faith schools research bank** is an invaluable tool for policymakers, politicians, academics, and anyone else interested in the topic. It provides an at-a-glance overview of the key evidence and central arguments made in almost two hundred different studies, with links to the original source. The research bank is arranged chronologically within a number of key sections, summarised below.

Social cohesion

The evidence in this section shows that faith schools undermine social cohesion by segregating pupils on religious, ethnic, racial and social grounds. By reducing contact between people from different social groups, faith schools foster exclusionary in-group dynamics that are detrimental to the wellbeing of a liberal, multicultural society. This evidence strongly undermines claims by supporters that faith schools facilitate social integration, promote a communal religious ethos and help to integrate minority faiths.

Performance and selection

A core feature of the debate around faith schools is the claim that they provide better education outcomes than non-faith schools. The evidence in this section shows that any educational advantages for faith schools are small and are explained by factors around pupil intakes, such as religiously selective admissions arrangements, rather than a faith ethos.

Choice and admissions

One of the main arguments made in favour of faith schools is that they increase diversity and choice by enabling parents to have their children educated according to their own faith tradition. This section points to evidence of the opposite effect. Faith schools restrict school choice for parents who do not share the religion of their local school. Some parents are left with little option but a faith school, while others face restricted access to local schools through the use of unfair admissions procedures. Some critics have also seriously questioned the consumerist framing of school issues around choice.

Values and morality

Many widely held moral principles are promoted by both faith and non-faith schools, the latter without framing these through an exclusively religious ethos. However, the evidence in this section shows that the promotion of religious values often runs contrary to ideals of equality in areas such as sexual orientation and reproductive rights. While supporters contend that educating children within a religious tradition fosters moral learning, critics argue this reflects a desire to advance the interests of religious institutions.

Opinion polls

Opinion poll evidence challenges the claim that faith schools are popular with parents and communities, showing strong and consistent opposition to the idea of state-funded faith schools, from religious and non-religious citizens alike. There is significant variation between the phrasing of questions and between religious denominations. Opposition to religious selection or discrimination in faith schools is particularly strong.

More information

The research bank is available online and as a pdf at secularism.org.uk/FSRB.

We encourage the submission of additional content, so the research bank remains an invaluable, relevant and accessible resource for years to come.

Questions and suggestions can be sent to education@secularism.org.uk.