

challenging religious privilege

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**Please don't drop the 50% cap on faith-based admissions to academies and free schools**

I write to congratulate you on your new appointment and to urge you strike a blow for cohesion, equality and fairness by dropping plans to remove the 50% cap on faith based admissions to academies and free schools.

The 'Schools That Work for Everyone' consultation closed over a year ago now, and we are still to learn whether the Government intends to proceed with what we regard as a deeply regressive proposal.

Whilst I am aware that you have previously advocated for the removal of any cap on faith-based admissions to Catholic schools, I urge you as education secretary to consider not only the effect that the lifting of the cap would have on Catholic schools, but the way it would impact on all other faith schools, including minority faith schools.

As you will be aware, the 50% cap was originally introduced and extended with the stated aim of aiding inclusion. In 2015 it was the opinion of Schools Minister Lord Nash that the cap was "an important way of supporting [faith-based free schools] to be inclusive and to meet the needs of a broad mix of families".

We are not alone in arguing that plans to drop the cap have the potential to significantly increase religious discrimination and social and ethnic segregation within publicly funded schools. The broad consensus is that removal of the cap would be harmful to social cohesion, resulting in even more of our children being separated and segregated by their religion.

The policy has been criticised by Sutton Trust, which warned that the removal of the cap would be "likely to make [faith schools] even more unrepresentative of their local areas, reducing the number of good school places available to pupils across the socio- economic spectrum." Likewise, The Education Policy Institute has warned that if the objective of government policy is to increase social mobility, this policy intervention is unlikely to be effective.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, has noted that "admission 100% on faith leads to increased levels of segregation within communities" and has made clear she is "uncomfortable with anything that leads to increased segregation".

Furthermore Britain's foremost expert on social cohesion, Ted Cattle CBE of the iCoCo Foundation, has called the proposal "wrong in principle and ill-conceived", warning that it will undermine wider Government efforts to improve integration. As Prof. Cattle has said: "Religious selection in school admissions is utterly deleterious for integration. And not just for religious integration, but for ethnic and socio-economic integration too."

The Government's consultation document set out a number of measures intended to make minority faith schools more integrated, inclusive and appealing to those who do not share the religion of the school. Such ineffective and tokenistic measures will do nothing to mitigate the problems caused by faith based schools, which will only be worsened by more religious selection.

We have been supportive of the Department's commitment to ensuring that young people leave school prepared for life in modern Britain. We question how it can possibly square this aspiration with a policy that will allow more children to be schooled in a completely immersive religious environment, surrounded by pupils of the same faith and, in many cases, the same ethnic background.

The lack of clear thinking over faith schools is illustrated by DfE guidance on "Promoting fundamental British values". On one hand it calls it "unacceptable" for schools to "promote discrimination against people or groups on the basis of their belief, opinion or background". But at the same time it seems content to allow them to do just that with regard to their admissions arrangements.

Rather than facilitating segregation along religious lines, we would urge the Government to make every effort to ensure that children of all faiths and none are educated together in inclusive schools.

A further expansion of religiously selective faith schools is the antithesis of inclusive education. We accept that new capacity is needed in the school system but it should be created without sacrificing equality and social cohesion. We urge you abandon these plans.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Evans  
Chief Executive