

BRIEFING:

Section 48/50 ‘religiosity inspections’ in faith schools

Faith schools in England & Wales are inspected by their sponsoring religious group, to ensure that their worship, religious education and overall approach promote a rigorous religious ethos. These publicly funded ‘religiosity inspections’ are required by law, in England and in Wales, through Sections 48 and 50 of the Education Act 2005.

A new report from the National Secular Society provides the key arguments for removing faith-based inspections of state schools. It features numerous case studies, including accounts from leaders within faith schools, and includes an in depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of 40 SIAMS (statutory inspections of Anglican and Methodist schools) reports.

Educationally inappropriate

These inspections are used by faith bodies to exert influence over the way in which education is provided and the environment in which it is delivered. School leaders are more qualified and better placed than religious bodies to make these decisions.

For example, a Catholic school in Birmingham was praised for being *“innovative in the way it uses the internet to evangelise”*; gives staff, pupils, and governors *“many opportunities to pray”*; and delivers relationships and sex education in a way that is *“consistent with the teachings of the Church”*.

An unnecessary cost for taxpayers

These inspections cost £760,000 a year on average. Grants for these add between seven and 14% to the cost of a typical Ofsted inspection.

Conflating religiosity with virtue, presenting widely shared moral values as being rooted in specific religions

82.5% of the reports we examined framed widely held values as uniquely or fundamentally “Christian”. 62.5% of the reports urged schools to be more explicit or exclusive about this.

“Make the core Christian values more explicit in the life of the school... Although there are displays such as thanking God for spring and a painting of the Trinity, these do not frame reflection in a Christian context.”

School 07 quoted in the qualitative analysis

Promoting religious organisations’ theological approach to religious education and collective worship

50% of the reports we examined explicitly promote the Church of England’s own evangelical RE resource. 57.5% of the reports conflated successful RE with promoting or eliciting Christian viewpoints.

There are already mechanisms in place intended to promote high quality religious education in all schools. There is no evidence to suggest that provision suffers without religiosity inspections.

“After each SIAMS, a shift was happening. A lengthy end of the day prayer was added. I even saw some teachers berating children for not joining in.”

Faith school leader quoted in the report

An unnecessary burden for schools

Testimonies highlighted in the report show that religiosity inspections can place a significant stress on teachers and senior leaders in faith schools. In addition to preparing for the usual inspections, they must prepare for an additional regime with often conflicting standards and aims.

This undermines leaders’ ability to balance the requirements of their faith ethos with the needs of their communities.

“SIAMs were a particular headache. The majority of the general public and school communities have no idea what these are and are often shocked to hear that they happen at all (at taxpayers’ expense) ... The inspections were a dreadful waste of time and resource. They are designed to find to how the school is ‘selling’ the C of E message. In particular, they pushed an approach to collective worship that was alien to the school”.

Faith school leader quoted in the report

Holding faith schools to different standards

A regime of religiosity inspections enforces the idea that faith schools should be held to different standards and alternative educational aims, undermining accountability. This ‘dual system’, whereby faith schools take a different approach to religious education, often with the freedom to teach from a denominational perspective, has long stood as a barrier to reforms in the subject.

There has been intense lobbying over the last decade to introduce ‘sensitivity’ to discourage Ofsted from pointing out failings where a faith school is unwilling to meet expected standards because of its religious ethos.

“Church schools had the added pressure of SIAMS inspections hanging over them and, with the support of a diocesan adviser, would be assured that using the resource would aid them in showing that they were matching their teaching of the subject to the Statement of Entitlement.”

Research quoted in the report

Recommendations

The report recommends key steps towards an appropriate education focussed inspections regime in all schools.

- 1. Repeal Sections 48 and 50 of the Education Act.**
- 2. Extend Ofsted or Estyn inspections to cover religious education in all schools.**
- 3. Stop public funding of religiosity inspections.**
- 4. Issue guidance on third party inspections of state schools.**
- 5. Strengthen Ofsted and Estyn inspections to cover religious education and ensure that all schools are promoting an appropriate and inclusive ethos.**

More information

The report is available via: secularism.org.uk/faith-schools/religiosity-inspections

Contact: education@secularism.org.uk for more information