

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. In some areas, families are effectively forced into faith schools due to the high proportion of faith schools and lack of secular provision. Many other families are unable to access local schools due to religiously selective admissions criteria. 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.

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

Via a [downloadable spreadsheet](#), users can select their own 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.

	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 schools	Localities (%)
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

Findings (2021)

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 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 schools	Localities (%)
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:

20,792 pupils assigned faith schools against preferences

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

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

Local authorities can be ranked by the total number assigned faith schools against preferences (1,085 pupils in Kent), or the proportion of applications (11.1% of pupils in Kensington and Chelsea).

This data provides a broad indicator of the problem. This does not capture every nuance. A family may prefer a non-faith school, and be happy with a faith option, or be unhappily forced to include faith schools in their preferences for practical reasons.

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.

No governmental estimates

The Government has confirmed that they have made no estimate of the number of pupils with little option but a faith school. This means that the [choice delusion](#) figures remain the best available estimate.

Do faith schools provide choice?

Simplistic ideas of choice in the debate over faith schools misrepresent the issues facing families in the real world. Research consistently shows that religious ethos is among the least important factors in school choice, far below location and academic standards.

Faith schools build division into the education system. But a narrow concept of 'choice' ignores this and the social role of education in creating a cohesive society.

The harm caused by religious discrimination in school admissions and exclusionary ethos, extends far beyond the inconvenient restriction of choice, and legitimises wider prejudices.

Some choice focused narratives ignore fundamental difference between a community ethos school, suitable for all and a school organised around a specific belief system. This invites the question of why the 'choice' of schools organised around atheist, political or other ideological belief systems are not catered for.

More information

Visit secularism.org.uk/ChoiceDelusion to explore the data on your area, or the national figures in more depth. If you have questions about the research, or have been affected by these issues, please contact education@secularism.org.uk for more information.

What can be done?

The absolute best way to address these problems is transitioning to a fully inclusive, secular (i.e., community-ethos) school system which provides a suitable education for all pupils irrespective of religion or belief.

In the meantime, a range of measures are consistent with a wide range of positions on the current role of faith schools within the state system, from those who wish to move entirely away from faith-based schooling to those focussed on mitigating inequities:

1. The Department for Education should monitor faith-based restrictions on school choice and suitability across England. New school plans should focus on addressing these.
2. There should be a legal entitlement for all families to have reasonable access to a non-faith (community-ethos) school.
3. Local authorities' duty to 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 provision.
4. Faith-based discrimination in admissions should be phased out, starting in areas of significant restrictions on school choice.
5. 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.
6. It should be made 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.