

HUMANISTS UK LATEST ANTI-FAITH SCHOOLS REPORT 09/2023

For decades the evidence has long made it undeniably clear that faith schools are one of the biggest drivers of racial, economic, and religious divides in our society. Not only that, but they are able to indoctrinate children – and the law actively encourages it.

That's why it was disappointing to hear Labour leader Keir Starmer promise Jewish leaders this week he would not 'tinker' with faith schools in any way, and a future government he led would be 'even more supportive of faith schools' than recent governments led by David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and Rishi Sunak. It goes without saying that recent Conservative governments have been among the most dogmatically pro-faith school of any in British history, so this is a deeply worrying vow! This uncritical support concerns us as it fails to take into account the vast weight of evidence of harm. We have written to him and the Shadow Secretary of State for Education to bring much needed awareness of the systemic problems concerning faith schools. **We need reform. The status quo is broken.** Like scandals over concrete in schools, this is another where doing nothing will only store up problems for the future!

Our state school system is a global anomaly. Over one third of all state schools in England are run by religious organisations, despite the fact England and Wales are two of the least religious nations on Earth. No other sovereign nation has a collective worship law like ours, either, which requires all schools of no religious character to hold 'daily acts of Christian worship'. And out of the 38 countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, only the UK, Estonia, Israel, and Ireland permit state schools to select pupils on a religious basis. It's unthinkable everywhere else!

The evidence is clear and unarguable: faith schools fracture our societies and discriminate in ways that are unacceptable in any other context. We don't think it's sensible to promise future government will simply exempt them from any and all future reforms of education. **Realistic solutions are needed from all politicians and parties.** The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recently slammed the UK for its approach to religion in schools. And rightly so. It is woefully out of step with international standards and commitments to freedom of religion or belief. With the changing demographics of over half the population now having no religion – this is even higher for young people and must not be ignored.

Schools are supposed to broaden young minds, teach critical thinking, and encourage wide learning about the world around us. But sadly, a third of tax-funded schools in the UK are 'schools with a religious character', permitted to evangelise to children from all backgrounds.

One of our most important campaigns is for an end to religious discrimination in schools – full stop. But one thing we encounter increasingly often is that the public are not informed about faith schools, how they operate, and what they're legally allowed to do. So, we're getting that information out there in more hands – with your help. Here are six facts about faith schools:

1) Most faith schools can select up to 100% of pupils based on religion

When oversubscribed, the majority of state faith schools are legally permitted to decline admission to children whose families are not of the faith of the school. That can mean requiring baptism, regular worship attendance, and more besides. Consequently, this leads to local parents being deprived of spots at their nearby school in favour of parents from distant areas. There is no way around it – this is religious discrimination.

2) Some faith schools use ‘faith school points’

This is granted by local churches and based on how much parents engage in ‘religious activities’. As well as attending services and baptism, this can mean participating in parent-toddler groups, joining choirs, taking part in nativity plays, and, in some cases, making donations to the religious group (although this last one is already against the law).

3) Faith schools divide communities

When children are selected based on their faith, this causes segregation of communities along religious, racial, and economic lines. Research shows that faith schools tend to admit fewer children from poorer families, instead favouring those from richer backgrounds.

4) Faith schools indoctrinate children – and the law encourages it.

So-called ‘collective worship’ is a legal requirement in all schools, and that requirement is strictly followed in most faith schools. All children are at risk of indoctrination, and any child removed from collective worship at the request of their parents is separated and isolated from their peers, often left with nothing to do. This should not be the case: we help parents to campaign for a better solution of inclusive assemblies. In the 21st century, the choice for parents should not be between religious indoctrination or social alienation.

5) Most faith schools discriminate against vulnerable children

In England, all state-funded schools are required to prioritise care-experienced children. However, because of their religiously selective admissions processes, faith schools are exempt from prioritising all Looked After Children (LAC) and Previously Looked After Children. We think this is a scandal that deserves further scrutiny and publicity.

6) The UK is only one of four countries in the OECD that does this

Alongside Estonia, Israel, and Ireland where state-funded schools can select pupils on the basis of religion.