

Please see my response to the request for views for the consultation. I am a parent living in Greater London, and my views have been formed based on my personal experience of local schools

Are current syllabuses for education about religions and beliefs in primary and secondary schools, including religious schools, appropriate and adequate? If not, what needs to be added or modified?

No, they are not adequate. I was born in 1972 and didn't hear the word "humanist" until I was in my early thirties. I was aware that I didn't believe the religious instruction I was given at my community primary school and Catholic secondary school, but I didn't have a name for what I did believe, and no way of identifying other people who held similar beliefs. Like many people, I was brought up to not mention the fact that I didn't believe in God, in case it offended someone who did. I wasn't encouraged to have confidence in my identity as a non-religious, critical thinker.

So what has changed? As an adult, the internet enabled me to identify myself as a humanist. I don't agree with everything that the British Humanist Association campaigns for, so no longer hold a membership – but I would certainly count myself as a supporter, and I identify with their description of what it is to be a humanist.

I would like my own children to be able to identify their own evolving beliefs more readily than I was able to do at the same age. They attend our local Church of England primary school. It teaches children about 5 world faiths, with the main focus on Christianity, and encourages children to express their own views. However, they don't teach about non-religious beliefs. It seems that is still considered taboo.

I talk to my children at home about my beliefs and allow them to make their own mind up, and express their own views. But I know other non-religious parents who still behave as my parents' generation behaved – discouraging their children from asking too many questions and talking about their religious doubts. I think that is unhealthy.

In conclusion, I agree with the view of the Accord Coalition, that Religious Education should become a National Curriculum subject. It should comply with the National Framework for RE, which recommends raising students' awareness of both religious and non-religious world views. Only then will our children be given the complete picture.

What should be the role of religion and belief organisations in relation to the running of state school systems?

It is not financially possible to give everybody a "choice" of schools. Politicians routinely claim that they are increasing parental choice by creating more places at faith schools, but they aren't. They can't be, because increased choice logically requires an increased surplus of places, whereas surpluses are being systematically reduced.

By creating the illusion of increased choice, what they are actually doing is restricting choice for those who are unable to access faith schools. To be clear – if there is any choice at all, it is not a choice of schools – it is the much more fundamental choice of whether or not to identify with a faith. Those that belong to certain faith communities have more choice of schools, but those that don't are finding they have an increasingly limited choice of school. Essentially, the system is coercive – it is encouraging people to identify with a faith to optimise their access to public services.

The effect is tangible in affluent high density areas such as Richmond-upon-Thames, where the Local Authority's target for school-place surpluses is a ruthless 0%, and the majority of

schools are highly oversubscribed. Those who are well informed and well organised, and who feel able to conform, will begin attending church 2 years before they are due to apply for a school place, because they don't want to be one of the large number of families who, every year, find themselves in the stressful situation of having no school place at all, or a school place that is inappropriate in terms of distance and/or quality. Very many people feel forced into the private sector against their will, and the council relies heavily on this annual drop-out from the state sector to keep down the cost of its "just in time delivery" approach to school place planning. The private school sector is booming on the back of this system.

So, while I have no objection to those legacy faith schools that have their roots in charity and provision of education to the poor, and while I respect the fact that the Church established those schools for all the right reasons at the time, I don't think it is appropriate in today's society to increase the number of faith school places. They may be popular in many areas, but it is disingenuous to assume that they are popular solely because of their faith ethos, rather than for more practical factors. For example, the Fair Admissions Campaign have demonstrated the indirect socio-economic selectivity of many faith schools, and the relative independence of Voluntary Aided schools has helped them to retain attractive resources such as playing fields, which have been degraded at many community schools over the years.

In summary, I think the numbers of places at faith schools should be held static, or reduced, rather than increased. The existing places should be viewed as a positive legacy of the past, rather than as a model for the future, and, as explained below, they should be accessible to people of all faiths and none.

Should the state education system be permitted to select pupils and staff on grounds of religion or belief?

No. People choose schools for a range of reasons, which are not recorded for analysis. Those people who are currently choosing faith schools may be choosing them because they are faith schools, or because they have the best exam results, the highest Ofsted rating, the most charismatic Headteacher, the shortest commute, the most attractive premises, or a whole host of other reasons. Those who choose the schools explicitly for the faith ethos, or who use their faith affiliation to access the schools for other reasons, should not be given priority, because that puts them in a privileged position and degrades the rights of everyone else to make an equally free choice of their local state funded schools. The 'right' to select a school place on grounds of faith should not trump the right of someone else to choose the same school place on grounds of proximity.

Some people say that selecting by faith is an antidote to the house-price inflation caused by distance selection, but it isn't. The effects are additive. Families wishing to access coveted faith school places are just as likely to house-hop as those seeking places at popular non-faith schools. Their faith affiliation may give them an advantage over non-religious families in the oversubscription criteria, but they are still competing with each other. In some areas, the fact that so many schools are inaccessible to those of no religion, or the "wrong" religion, increases house price gradients around community schools, because the relative scarcity of community places makes competition more fierce.

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