

Campaign for State Education – Briefing

Faith Schools

1. What are "faith" schools?

In the context of the present public debate, these are schools whose land and buildings are owned by religious organisations but are funded by the state. In England and Wales, for example, there are currently 1,855 Roman Catholic primary schools and 393 Roman Catholic secondary schools. In England alone the Church of England has 4,468 primary schools and 201 secondaries.

These make up the vast majority of "faith" schools but they are not the only ones. 26 primary schools are owned by the Methodist Church, 26 are Jewish, 3 are Muslim and one is Sikh. There are also a further ten secondary schools, of which seven are Jewish, two are Muslim and one is Sikh. The situation is similar in Scotland and Northern Ireland. There are also, of course, fee-paying faith schools which are independent of the state. This briefing paper is not concerned with these.

2. Do all "faith" schools work in the same way?

No: these schools do not all perform the same kind of function within the system. Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh schools are intended to cater for designated religious minorities and places in these schools are always offered in the first instance to members of the relevant faith community, non-members only being admitted if there are places left over. Church of England primary schools, on the other hand are open to everyone and in many rural areas the Church of England primary school is the only school. In some urban areas, where immigration from the Indian sub-continent has altered the local demographic make-up, Church of England primary schools may have pupil intakes which are dominated by Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. Church of England secondary schools, however, are much more likely to have a strong Anglican identity and to give preference in their admissions policies to children who attend church.

3. What are the funding mechanisms of "faith" schools?

For many years faith schools were designated as "Voluntary Controlled" or "Voluntary Aided." Recently, some religious organisations have founded "academy" schools.

- **Voluntary Controlled** schools are owned by the religious organisation, which appoints a minority of the Governors, but the running of the school is in the hands of the Local Authority. The Authority determines the curriculum, in accordance with national policy, and appoints the staff. The Head teacher is also appointed by the Local Authority but from a shortlist supplied by the Governors. Nearly all Church of England primary schools come into this category.

- **Voluntary Aided** schools appoint the majority of the Governors, who in turn appoint the Head and staff. The Governors also determine the content of the school's Religious Education, in accordance with the policy of the relevant religious organisation. The Local Authority pays all maintenance costs but the Governors have to pay 10% of any approved capital expenditure. There are also Voluntary Aided schools which are not religious in character.
- **Academy** schools have even more independence (for details see CASE's briefing on Academies).

4. Why does the United Kingdom spend public money on "faith" schools?

The reasons are historical. By the early 19th century it had become obvious that a national system of schools was needed but a powerful alliance of landowners and industrialists succeeded in keeping this reform at bay until 1870. In the meantime the gap was filled by a large network of "voluntary" schools, most of which were owned and administered by religious organisations. By the time the 1870 Education Act was passed, some of these schools had been in existence for almost a century and, in a typical act of British pragmatism and compromise, the government decided to incorporate most of them into the new state system while leaving them free to retain their religious identity. During the early 20th century, various agreements were reached specifying the relative amount of control that the state and the religious body would have.

5. Why is there a debate about "faith" schools?

- The purpose of Christian faith schools is no longer clear. Originally these schools were set up to provide education to the poor but, in most cases, they are no longer fulfilling this function. A generation or two ago, they were seen by the churches as a means of transmitting Christian faith and practice but they cannot be said to be fulfilling this function either, since most children who attend Anglican or Roman Catholic schools do not regularly go to church, although they may do so for a while as a means of obtaining admission to the school. This leaves a rather vaguer purpose of transmitting Christian "values" but, if that is their purpose, it is difficult to see why they should apply religious admissions criteria. Indeed, if the churches take their role seriously as propagators of "Christian values", we should expect them to welcome in precisely those children they are most likely to reject!
- Britain now has large numbers of people who adhere to non-Christian religions, the great majority of them



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being members of ethnic minorities. In continuing to maintain Christian schools, the government has been forced to concede that non-Christian religions have an equal right to state maintained religious schools. Although in practice very few such schools have come into being, the idea causes public nervousness as such schools are seen as likely to reinforce racial segregation.

- A number of the new “academies” have been founded either by established religious organisations or by rich individuals who hold strong religious convictions. Some of the latter have beliefs about, for example, the origins of the world and of human life which are in direct contradiction of modern scientific thought. Some sponsors of academies, which are free from many of the constraints of the National Curriculum, expect these ideas to be taught in “their” schools.
- In areas with substantial non-Christian ethnic minority populations, faith schools may, albeit unintentionally, contribute to the problem of “parallel existence”, whereby different communities live in the same town but rarely, if ever, interact with one another. This phenomenon is believed to make a significant contribution to the racial tensions that exist in some towns and cities.
- During the last 15 years faith schools have become part of the government’s “choice and diversity” agenda. Thanks not least to the personal advocacy of Tony Blair, many Roman Catholic and Church of England secondary schools have come to be seen by ambitious parents as “desirable”. It is held that these schools not only achieve better academic results than their state counterparts but that they have a superior “ethos” (an idea with which the churches themselves are more than happy to agree). This has led to a number of serious problems, not least the suspicion that religious criteria are used by faith schools as a means of securing for themselves a socially and economically advantaged intake.
- Defenders of faith schools will argue that not all of them create or contribute to problems of academic, social and racial balance. Church of England voluntary controlled schools do not employ religious admissions criteria and often simply function as the local state school. In a few areas the Church of England has deliberately opened its secondary schools to the local community. Taken as a whole, Roman Catholic secondary schools are more likely than state schools to be racially mixed and socially balanced and, in 2008, 30% of their pupils were not Catholics. However, this last is not a **virtue** of Catholic schools but an **accident**: wherever the number of Catholic pupils equals the number of places in a school the school is obliged to give first preference to Catholics. If the number of Catholics exceeds the number of available places, as in some parts of the South East, the school gives preference to those who are seen to practise their religion by regularly attending church. Just as with Anglican schools, the employment of outward religious practice as an admissions criterion favours more stable, more middle class families and gives the school a privileged intake.
- Defenders will also point out that many secular schools also seem able to contrive an advantaged in-

take for themselves and that the problem of unfair admissions practices is not confined to faith schools: ending faith schools will not end covert selection. However, there is good evidence from a recent government survey (April 2nd, 2008) that faith schools are particularly likely to contravene the government's admissions code. Of 106 voluntary aided schools in the survey, chosen to be representative of England as a whole, 96 were found to be breaking the code in one or more ways. Of these 96 schools, 87 were faith schools.

6. What CASE thinks

- CASE believes that, in the pluralistic society that is modern Britain, public education should be secular in character. CASE recognises that religion has played a key role in our history and in the development of our culture and believes that all children should be properly taught **about** religion but should not be taught particular sets of beliefs at public expense. Regular surveys of public opinion suggest that this is the view of most British citizens. CASE believes that the current requirement for state schools to hold daily assemblies that are “broadly Christian” in character is an anachronism that should be abolished immediately.
- CASE recognises that religion cannot always be easily dissociated from cultural identity and practice and, therefore, does not believe that it can be in the public interest to fund schools which are likely to reinforce cultural differences.
- CASE believes that, whatever the merits of church schools at different times in our history, their modern continuance at public expense cannot be justified in a society that can no longer be described as other than nominally Christian.
- CASE recognises that the transition to a wholly secular state education system cannot be achieved overnight and that the problem of faith schools has to be dealt with in the broader context of reforming the system as a whole. As a first step, CASE believes that no publicly funded school should be able to control its own admissions and that, in return for public funding, faith schools should be required to accept an intake that is broadly representative, in demographic terms, of the Local Authority as a whole.

Feedback on this document will be gratefully received. You can contact CASE by post c/o 98 Erlanger Road, London, SE14 5TH, by phone on 07932 149 942, or by email at contact@campaignforstateeducation.org.uk

Our website is:

www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk

CASE has been campaigning on education issues for over 40 years and relies entirely on membership fees to fund its activities.

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