

Faith schools: a humanist perspective

Arguments against faith schools

Humanists tend to oppose the existence of faith schools. They generally disapprove of schools being able to present one particular worldview as the truth and of schools being able to select pupils according to the religion of their parents. Humanist arguments against faith schools fall into three categories (similar to the common arguments for **secularism**): arguments grounded on **fairness**, **freedom**, and **peace**.



Fairness

Faith schools reduce the choice of many parents to send their children to their preferred school. Many non-religious parents are forced to send their children to a faith school because it is the only school available. Other non-religious parents might want to send their child to a local faith school (perhaps because it is nearby, or their child's friends attend the school, or the school excels at sport or music) but they are denied access as the school is able to prioritise children from religious families. The freedom provided to religious parents to choose a faith-based education for their children reduces the freedom of choice for non-religious parents, and **the right of everyone to equal access**.

There is also strong evidence that selecting children by the religion of their parents can divide children according to their ethnicity, socio-economic background, and prior academic achievement. Evidence shows that faith schools have lower numbers of children from poorer families than similar schools in the local area. This selection can contribute to faith schools getting better academic results.¹

Freedom

We should all be free to form our own beliefs. That requires a broad and balanced education that includes learning about different ways of understanding the world. Faith schools are allowed to teach their own form of religious education, which can present one view as the truth and can exclude alternative worldviews. While parents have the right to bring children up according to their own religion, **children have rights** of their own, including the right to receive information and ideas of all kinds so that they are able to make informed decisions about their own beliefs.

Peace (social harmony)

Young people should have the opportunity to learn and play with children from all walks of life. When people are divided up according to their religion or belief, it reduces opportunities to develop mutual understanding and is damaging to social cohesion. To learn tolerance and respect **we need to interact with others who are different from ourselves**. Decades of dividing children from Catholic and Protestant families in Northern Ireland created challenges for peace and reconciliation.

¹ See epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/faith-schools-pupil-performance-social-selection or cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp228.pdf or humanism.org.uk/2019/01/24/secondary-league-tables-unfairly-benefit-religious-schools-by-ignoring-pupil-backgrounds-say-academics.

Not all faith schools teach a narrow RE curriculum or select their students on the basis of religion. However, the law allows them to, and some take advantage of this. Many humanists believe we should change the law to make sure all schools are **inclusive**.

One particular objection made by humanists is that most faith schools are funded largely by taxation. Everyone pays whether they benefit from those schools or not. Humanists believe the system discriminates against non-religious children and children from minority-religious backgrounds. Few people would accept discrimination in other taxpayer-funded institutions such as hospitals or public transport.

'Why not set up humanist schools?'

Many humanists believe that such schools would be just as problematic. They argue that all schools should be inclusive. They should be places where children learn about a wide variety of worldviews and have the opportunity to mix with children from a range of backgrounds.

Humanists are not alone when it comes to campaigning against faith schools. [The Accord Coalition for Inclusive Education](#) includes humanists and religious people who share a common view that the current system of faith schools is unfair.

'The way that religion and belief is currently handled within the school system is becoming increasingly anachronistic in our mixed-belief society. I look forward to the day when all state-funded schools are open and accessible to those of different beliefs and backgrounds.'



Simon Barrow, Christian theologian and Chair of the Accord Coalition

'The freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right, which applies to children just as it does to adults. However, segregating children according to the religion of their parents, and exposing them only to the belief system of one particular religion, takes this freedom away. For as long as state funded faith schools exist, children's rights are being denied.'



Robert Cann, Education Campaigns Manager, Humanists UK

'The system means that some schools could find themselves with almost all of their pupils coming from the same faith background, and even the same ethnic background. That's problematic for society because it means that children can become segregated from other people in the community. That can harm social cohesion and inter-communal understanding. Humanists think all schools should be open and inclusive. They should be places to break down barriers rather than build them up.'



Ruth Wareham, Education Policy Researcher, Humanists UK

'It might be a reasonable position for a parent to say that they want their children to be raised in line with their religion or belief. Parents have that right. But what they don't have is a right for the state to provide a school that meets that need whilst disadvantaging others... Freedom and rights are all about trade-offs, and the presence of faith schools, rather than fully open schools that everyone can equally access, clearly doesn't get that balance right. They champion the rights of some religious people over the rights of everyone to equal access.'



Jay Harman, Education Campaigns Manager (2015-18), Humanists UK

Some facts about faith schools

Currently one third of state schools in England are faith schools, one sixth of schools in Wales are faith schools, and in Northern Ireland all schools are Christian schools. While the number of religious people in the UK continues to fall, new faith schools continue to open.

Evidence from the Fair Admissions Campaign shows that, overall, comprehensive secondary schools with no religious character admit 5% more pupils eligible for free school meals than live in their local areas. But comprehensive Church of England secondaries admit 15% fewer; Roman Catholic secondaries 28% fewer; Jewish secondaries 63% fewer; and Muslim secondaries 29% fewer.² Religious admissions selection can lead to socio-economic selection.

Research from 2017 published on the DfE's website shows that pupils in ethnically mixed schools are more trusting and have more positive views of children from different backgrounds than do pupils in segregated schools.³

Just four OECD countries fund state schools that are able to discriminate in their selection of pupils based on the religion of their parents: the UK, the Republic of Ireland, Israel, and Estonia.



It can be argued that there are no truly secular schools in England as all schools are required to carry out a daily act of **collective worship** that is broadly Christian in character. Many schools choose not to, but in doing so they are breaking the law. Humanists typically argue that collective worship would be better replaced with inclusive assemblies that did not exclude children from other religious or non-religious backgrounds. Every week, more children take part in compulsory acts of collective worship in Church of England schools than there are adults attending CofE churches.⁴

Humanists have also long campaigned for the provision of **relationships and sex education** in schools. This was made compulsory in 2020. However, faith schools still have the opportunity to take account of 'the religious background of the pupils'. In practice this means that some faith schools have not been inclusive of LGBT relationships in their teaching.



There also exist **illegal religious schools** in the UK. These often teach a very narrow religious curriculum and deny young people access to other parts of the curriculum (such as science, and relationships and sex education). Ofsted estimates that there are around 6000 children in such schools in the UK. Humanists UK campaigns to draw attention to the existence of these schools and for all pupils to receive broad and balanced education.

² fairadmissions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Overview-of-issues-to-do-with-religious-selection-in-school-admissions.pdf

³ assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/634118/Diversity_and_Social_Cohesion_in_Oldham_schools.pdf

⁴ humanists.uk/2016/01/14/44689