

ATL questions the increasing role of faith schools (in the UK/England)

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Members of ATL, the education union, have long been involved in a broad range of educational and equality issues, from curriculum to assessment, from the marketisation of schools to the increasing emphasis by government on faith schools. Concerns about balance in school provision and the expansion of the faith schools' sector were raised by members at our annual conference in 2006. Following a vote against any further increase in the number of faith schools after 2020, members worked to develop ATL's policy on faith schools.

A perceived imbalance between the level of state funding and the freedoms granted by the state to faith schools, led members to examine those freedoms to see the effect they have on schools and their local communities.

From research evidence and member experience, it was found that selective admissions procedures, such as those practised by many faith schools, led to higher segregation of pupils in affected local authorities. We firmly believe segregating children on religious grounds is divisive to communities.

Drawing all the member work and research together we produced an ATL policy document which concentrates on admissions, employment practice and the school curriculum, against a background of equality and community cohesion. Our policy proposes linking levels of autonomy granted to schools to evidence they are promoting social and community cohesion.

Schools, such as voluntary aided faith schools, which practise selective admissions procedures that favour one particular faith group will, under our proposals and indeed, under the new community cohesion duty, need to demonstrate through their curriculum, outreach and other activity, they promote community cohesion and their pupils will gain a strong understanding of the broader community. This proposal certainly fits within broader societal concerns and also within the Every Child Matters agenda.

ATL represents education staff across all sectors and not only believes every child matters, but also that every education professional matters. Our members are deeply concerned about equality of opportunity in employment in all schools. In Autumn 2006, we strongly expressed our objection to late amendments to the Education and Inspections Bill (now in Act), which extended the prescription of employment, by faith, to new categories of staff, such as support staff in voluntary aided schools.

These amendments will not only limit employment opportunities for our members of other or non-faith backgrounds, but also have a limiting effect on schools. Evidence has shown many faith schools have difficulty in filling headship positions due to the curtailing effect of their employment practices on recruitment. While members fully accept that school staff should be required to support the ethos of the school in which they work, they strongly question the interpretation that suggests that all, or key staff, must necessarily be of the same religion as the school foundation. We believe the legislative right of faith schools to select candidates on the basis of their religion is discriminatory.

The issues in the faith schools' debate not only centre around who they serve and who they employ, but also on the curriculum within these schools. Members are concerned about the right of faith schools to follow their own religious education curriculum, particularly at a time when the need for cross-faith understanding is so high. We feel this right is questionable since the major religious groups not only had significant input to the development of the National Framework for Religious Education (a voluntary national RE syllabus), but also have representation on the local Standing Advisory Committees for Religious Education (SACREs) who determine the content of the RE syllabus in local community schools. Particularly as the RE curriculum in faith schools is not subject to the same inspection arrangements as those for community non-faith schools.

We recognise that many faith schools teach a broad RE curriculum, some following the National Framework. However, we question the extent of the legislative 'freedom' granted to faith schools by the Government, particularly when set against the high level of government funding they receive (100% of running costs and 90% of capital costs).

There are many issues of equality within this debate which must include a strong understanding of community needs and of a broad concept of citizenship. We clearly recognise that many faith schools offer excellent teaching and service to the community. However, we believe the fragmentation of education opportunities for pupils is not a good starting point for a society now recognising the dangers of segregation, the importance of community cohesion and shared understanding and values. We need schools that embrace the diversity of individuals within our communities, not a diversity of institutions dividing pupils and staff on religious grounds.

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