

Faith Schools

ATL Position Statement 2007

In recent years there have been widely reported exchanges of views surrounding the issue of faith schools, particularly those in the State sector. Frequently contentious, the debate has reflected the concerns of a broad range of individuals and groups, within and outside education.

Many of those concerns centre on the role of all schools to promote social cohesion against a backdrop of increasing government interest and investment in faith schools. Government policy perceives faith schools as a vehicle for delivering higher academic achievements, increased parental choice and coherent morality systems for pupils. As the evidence on whether current faith schools actually deliver these objectives is mixed, it is highly questionable that their expansion will do so, and ATL believes that the resulting imbalance of education provision is too costly to justify this flawed approach.

In a country portrayed statistically as progressively secular and yet diverse, the existence of denominational schools within the State sector is increasingly anomalous. ATL recognises that some faith schools offer excellent teaching and are well integrated into their local community. However, ATL believes that the fragmentation of education opportunities for pupils is not a good starting point for a society which is beginning to acknowledge the dangers of segregation, the importance of community cohesion and of shared understandings and values. ATL believes that we need schools that embrace the diversity of the individuals within our community, not a diversity of institutions dividing pupils and staff on religious grounds.

Government funding and faith schools

The present status of faith schools stems from the 1944 Education Act, which settled a longstanding dispute between Church and State over control of schools. In return for a degree of autonomy, Church authorities were required to contribute financially to their schools. In the intervening years, the role of the churches has declined in a society that has become increasingly secular and also more multi-faith. Yet subsequent legislation has given increased powers and freedoms to religious organisations in relation to the running of State-maintained faith schools while reducing their financial commitment. Faith schools receive grants (of up to 90% of the total cost) towards capital costs of the buildings and 100% of running costs (including teachers' salaries) from the State. Yet voluntary-aided faith schools are allowed to impose faith restrictions on employment, admissions, curriculum content and on school worship.

ATL believes that faith schools should be more accountable if they continue to receive this level of State funding. State funding should be earned through evidence of socially just educational practices and a widening of service to the whole community. It is, after all, the community that pays such a large proportion of their costs.

Admissions, segregation and community

ATL is concerned with research findings that indicate higher levels of segregation in those local authorities (LAs) with the highest numbers of faith schools, particularly those with restrictive admissions or curriculum. We know that this concern is shared by many others, both outside of and within, religious organisations and communities. A number of religious spokespeople have also decried the separation of children by faith affiliation, pointing out the risks of ignorance (of others who are perceived to be different) in terms of misunderstandings, parallel lives and potential for conflict. The Cante report (2001) stated that, "contact with other cultures should be a clear requirement for, and development of, the concept of citizenship education from September 2002, and possibly a condition of funding".

ATL wants this duty, to ensure that pupils have contact with other cultures, placed on all schools. This is particularly important in faith schools where the risks of segregation may be higher.

However, ATL does not advocate a faith-blind approach in schools, since this would not acknowledge the complexity of community or the individuality of pupils. It is vitally important that our public culture, in this

case our schools, is faith-sensitive, and avoids the blockading of faith communities into embattled, inward-looking and defensive enclaves.

ATL calls for faith schools to implement measures, through their admissions, curriculum and employment practices, to ensure that they minimise the risk of segregation and to promote the goal of community cohesion.

ATL recognises that faith schools operate a variety of admissions policies, often determined by the schools' mission and levels of subscription. ATL acknowledges that there are many faith schools in areas of high social deprivation which do not have selective admissions policies; their mission is to serve their local community through education regardless of the faith make-up of that community.

However, other faith schools see their mission as the transmission of religious belief and culture from one generation to another, and have closed admission procedures with the majority of places allocated to those from their own faith community. Recently, some religious groups have shown their determination to maintain autonomy over admissions. In autumn 2006, these religious bodies overturned government plans to oblige faith schools to reserve up to 25% of school places for pupils with other or no faith, where there is local demand.

The question of admissions not only relates to equality of access, but also the perceived academic success of faith schools. Research has shown that higher performance levels of faith schools occur in those with selective admissions procedures and that these higher rates of achievement are due to autonomous governance and admissions arrangements and not due to religious character. This is significant when we consider that one of the key drivers of government expansion of faith schools is the perception of their higher academic success.

Compared to national averages, pupils in faith and autonomous schools are much less likely to be entitled to free school meals and are more likely to have English as their first language.

ATL recognises that changing the legal status and existing autonomy of State-maintained faith schools would be difficult and complex, considering the history, political background, current sensitivities and levels of influence practised by some of the main religious affiliations. As such, our position has been developed from what is currently possible and realistic. An aspect of it centres on the, now Ofsted-inspected, duty for all schools to show evidence of promoting community cohesion.

ATL calls for the development of a framework of civic engagement in which faith and non-faith schools can work together for the common good and contribute to a community culture that transcends particular religious and cultural identities.

ATL proposes that criteria related to the promotion of community cohesion should be linked to the level of autonomy granted to schools, including faith schools, such as freedoms over the setting of admissions procedures and the curriculum taught within the school. Schools would meet this criteria through evidence of a range of activities; from specific projects to promote community dialogue and increased understanding, to activity across the taught curriculum promoting values of community engagement and tolerance.

Therefore, restrictive admissions could not be legally set by a school that does not show evidence of promoting community cohesion throughout its practices. All schools should be supported in this duty by the relevant bodies, including the Commission on Integration and Cohesion.

However, ATL recognises the difficulties for schools in finding the time to incorporate anything new within an already over-crowded curriculum, particularly one narrowed through excessive testing. Furthermore, we believe that the current system of ranking school performance in league tables to be antithetical to the goal of inter-school collaboration.

ATL therefore calls for an urgent review of current school accountability practice, particularly school performance league tables and high-stakes national testing, in order that community cohesion and school collaboration is more than an aspiration.

Equalities

There are numerous equalities issues on both sides of the faith schools debate. It is clear, from an equality standpoint, that supporters (be they teachers, parents, politicians or the general public) of Church of England, Roman Catholic and Jewish schools can not claim rights for them that they are then uncomfortable being accorded to other faith schools, such as Muslim, Sikh, Hindu or other faiths.

There is a dilemma for those concerned with education when trying to weigh the need for all faiths to be treated equally against the need for balance in school provision. ATL believes that this will require some innovative responses, with little place for 'position' politics or unwillingness to change.

The rights of groups are often talked about in the same light as the rights of individuals, yet the aggregation of individual rights is problematic as the rights of the group can conflict with the rights of the individual. After all, we are not merely defined by membership of one group; there are many other facets of identity. One can be defined by location, class, profession, race, sexuality, interests and so on.

ATL cautions against the homogenisation of groups through a faith identity that fails to recognise the diversity within.

As a union that supports teachers, support staff and school leaders, ATL is highly concerned by the equality of employment opportunities in faith schools. Current arrangements are restrictive, particularly within voluntary-aided schools, to protect the religious character of these schools. Indeed, late amendments to the Education and Inspections Act 2006 allow voluntary-aided faith schools to stipulate the religious belief of all employees, including support staff. In addition, this Act permits voluntary-controlled faith schools, which are **fully** funded by the LA, to do the same for headship applicants. ATL strongly opposes this extension of staff appointment prescription in faith schools.

ATL believes that the rights of faith schools to select candidates on the basis of their religion to be discriminatory and calls for an immediate halt to any extension of this privilege to new categories of staff.

It is not only our members and teacher colleagues who lose out as a result of these selection practices but also schools and pupils. We know that there is a particular recruitment problem in faith schools. For headteacher positions, not only must the pool of candidates be of the same religion as the faith school but they must also fit within certain parameters of personal behaviour; for example, practising Catholics can be ruled out if they have chosen to live with their partner before marriage, been divorced or are openly gay. This problem of recruitment in faith schools will only worsen should the faith school sector expand and increasingly, schools, staff, pupils and their parents will lose out.

Those strongly in favour of faith schools often cite the rights of religious parents, as taxpayers, to ensure that their child has State schooling within a school that promotes their faith. However, in areas where faith schools are over-subscribed, there is a real risk that non-religious parents, who are also taxpayers, do not have the same rights of access. Also, should the number of faith schools substantially increase, many parents may lose the right to ensure that their child goes to a community, non-faith school. Increased parental choice, whilst a mantra of the current government, is not without cost; one parent's choice (and their ability to exercise it) has an impact on the choice of others. Ultimately, with regards to the more popular schools, choice is exercised far more by the school than by the parents.

ATL believes that, in order to aid community cohesion rather than promote the rights of one section of the community, parental choice for a place in a faith school must be treated as an equality issue.

ATL believes that all schools should promote a culture of questioning, knowledge, respect, acceptance that others hold different beliefs, exploration and affirmation of values. ATL also believes that schools should be places where learners can develop their own identities and sense of place in the world. ATL shares the concern of Amartya Sen (Nobel Prize winner and author of *Identity and Violence*, 2006) that focussing, through schooling, on only one aspect of identity can miss out or suppress other aspects of identity, particularly those that do not fit in with the ethos of the religious group. A striking example of this is where a young person, brought up within a particular religion, discovers their homosexuality. They can then often find it difficult to reconcile these two aspects of their identity.

Therefore, ATL reiterates that all schools, including faith schools, should have admissions and recruitment practices which are inclusive and appreciate the diversity of the school and community population by promoting dialogue and understanding.

Curriculum, worship and inclusive practice within faith schools

ATL recognises that tenets of the faith system impose restrictions on not only on what is taught within faith schools but on how it is taught. The national curriculum, despite its current over-burdened and over-tested state, has a significant role within faith schools through its prescription of the taught curriculum.

ATL therefore welcomes the integration of independent faith schools into the maintained sector. Even within the state-maintained sector, faith schools have a number of freedoms from national curriculum criteria which non-faith schools do not have. ATL believes that all curriculum subjects, particularly RE, personal, social and health education and citizenship, should be subject to the same criteria, monitoring and inspection within faith schools as experienced in non-faith schools.

Under current arrangements, faith schools have the freedom to ignore the National Framework for Religious Education and are not subject to the same Ofsted inspection arrangements of the subject. ATL believes that all schools should be equally subject to the edicts of local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education or to the National Framework and that RE in faith schools should be subject to the same inspection regime, with a clear definition of the criteria, as imposed on non-faith maintained schools.

ATL recognises that one of the strengths of faith schools is their recognition of the religious identities of their pupils. In some faith schools, where the school population is religiously diverse, this can extend to all pupils.

ATL, as the education union, is concerned with those community schools that fail to recognise the importance of religious belief to some or all of their pupils. ATL has a similar concern for those faith schools whose practices belie a respect for all faiths and beliefs, both within their school population and within the wider community.

ATL advocates a curriculum and practice in both faith and non-faith schools that recognises the diversity of the school population in terms of background, values and beliefs, and encourages those pupils and their experiences to enrich all aspects of the curriculum within the school.

ATL recognises much of the good practice within faith schools; this needs to be shared and collaboration facilitated within the LAs.

ATL believes that all schools, including faith schools, need to have a responsibility towards the common good, the greater community, and to be expected to show evidence of actively supporting this goal. It is also crucial that LAs are the final arbiters of what constitutes the common good and its related activities in the context of their communities.

Conclusion

ATL's concern regarding faith schools is not merely in response to the current status quo but because of what we perceive as a growing imbalance in terms of education provision in this country and the implications for the future.

ATL knows, through the history of faith schools themselves, that it is difficult to predict both conditions around subsidy and the groups to which they will be extended in the future. ATL believes that limits need to be set over the extent to which State funding will continue to support the opening of new faith schools. This is a particular concern at a time when there are an increasing number of ways in which religious bodies and groups can have a disproportionate influence on schools.

Indeed, it is not only the types of faith school which are expanding but also the mission of those already in existence; the Archbishops' Council's Report (2001) stated that Church schools were on a mission to secure, 'the long-term well-being of the Church of England' with the duty to 'nourish those of the faith; encourage those of other faiths; challenge those who have no faith'. Certainly, the proliferation of faith schools will challenge many; those of no faith and also those who wish to embrace a wider concept of education where educating the child is paramount above the growth of an institution.

The issue of faith schools will not be easily resolved; with some of the main players entrenching and strengthening their own positions ATL is advocating a best-fit solution within the current context. We believe that the right kind of question at this time (to paraphrase the theologian Miroslav Volf) is not about how to achieve the final reconciliation but what resources we need to live in peace in its absence.

ATL believes:

- that new criteria should be developed for all faith schools which contain core curriculum requirements;
- that faith schools should have flexible and reviewable admissions criteria which take account of school and local needs;
- that the primary aim of faith schools (expressed through their mission statements and practices) should be to educate pupils as responsible and compassionate global citizens with the skills and knowledge to question and understand the world around them and to respect the beliefs, cultures and opinions of others. The promotion of the faith group should be secondary to this education and pupil focused aim.

ATL calls for these and the other measures outlined in this paper to be carried out by faith schools, religious groups and relevant State bodies within a structure of accountability and support. There should also be clear links between levels of funding, rights received and evidence of progress achieved towards community cohesion and the teaching of a broad education for all pupils.

If you would like further information or to comment on this briefing paper please do so by contacting ATL on policybriefings@atl.org.uk.