

Faith school leaders unite to rebut criticism

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Press Release issued on behalf of Faith Schools' Providers Group: 'Faith Schools in the System'

A coalition of religious figures representing over 6,000 Church of England, Catholic, Methodist, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu state-funded schools has today issued the following statement in response to criticism of faith schools from a group called 'Accord', as a greater number of families than ever choose to send their children to faith schools in the maintained sector this September.

Faith communities entirely refute the allegation that faith schools are discriminatory, or that they represent a divisive force within British society.

We stand as representatives of schools who work tirelessly to not only provide high quality education in some of the most challenging contexts in the country, but to nurture religious values of respect and care for others in young people. This latest attack, based on unspecified 'research', does a disservice to the huge value that faith schools add to our state education sector and the extent of appreciation that parents and students have for these schools.

European Human Rights legislation guarantees the rights of parents to schooling compatible with their religious and philosophical beliefs. We believe that parents and students should have the right to choose the type of environment in which they will flourish academically, socially and spiritually. We believe in faith schools for a number of reasons:

- Faith schools are open to applications from students of other faiths and none. While over-subscribed faith schools can give priority to students from relevant religious groups, many will also include children from non-religious backgrounds and other faith groups too. Whatever the admissions policy, national and local religious authorities exercise constant vigilance to ensure that the process is conducted in a transparent, open and accountable way.
- Faith schools **consistently deliver excellent academic results, within a caring atmosphere that nurtures the whole student as an individual.** We are not aware of any robust large-scale research that supports allegations that these results are due to 'cherry-picking' certain types of student from non-faith grounds. Indeed, the intake of state-funded faith schools often reflects a broader ethnic range than comprehensive schools in the same area. Faith schools – like all schools – work to realise the potential of each and every student, whatever their background.
- All state-funded faith schools teach about and inculcate a sense of social responsibility, usually within an ethnically diverse context. They nurture an understanding and appreciation of other cultures, promote good citizenship and give young people the chance to practice this in varied ways through the curriculum. They are frequently commended by Ofsted for achieving these goals – in addition to their high academic standards.
- Faith schools develop best practice that supports community cohesion in terms of sharing their resources, serving as hubs for other community groups, and generating social capital.
- Faith communities will go out of their way to support those suffering from hardship and assist those who request financial help. Methodologies which purport to assess the socio-economic make-up of pupils at state-funded faith schools are highly questionable. For example, the cost of school meals for those attending faith schools from poorer backgrounds may be subsidised by members of the faith community. Accordingly, statistics on free school meals do not provide a reliable or accurate picture of the financial circumstances of faith school pupils.
- The staff teams of faith schools are diverse, with members drawn from all faiths and backgrounds. This diversity is what helps make faith schools as vibrant and stimulating as any other school environment. The new regulations relating to certain categories of employment are not discriminatory – they are there to enable faith schools to maintain parental choice by developing their distinctive ethos.
- In September 2007, **all the main faith school providers in England signed up to a shared vision for promoting community cohesion through schools with a religious character.** In 'Faith in the System', the Government and religious groups confirmed their commitment to continue to work together – and with schools with and without a religious character – to improve the life chances of children, to build bridges to greater mutual trust and understanding and to contribute to a just and cohesive society.

It is to this vision to which, between us, we have been dedicated

ted for up to 200 years. It is a vision shared by growing numbers of parents and students across the country. As thousands of students are starting a new school year, it is disappointing that some commentators see fit to attribute an inaccuracy to the character assassination of some of the brightest success stories of our education system.

Revd Janina Ainsworth, Chief Education Officer, Church of England Board of Education
Henry Grunwald, QC, President, Board of Deputies of British Jews and Chair, Jewish Leadership Council
Oona Stannard, Chief Executive and Director, Catholic Education Service For England And Wales
Graham Russell, Education Secretary in the Connexions team, Methodist Church
Dr Mohamed Mukadam, Chair, Association of Muslim Schools UK & Ireland
Muslim Council of Britain
Dr Indarjit Singh, Director, Network of Sikh Organisations
Nitesh Gor, I-Foundation
Hindu Forum of Britain

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Background note on staff employment regulations

Schools with a designated faith character are able to ask for faith commitment as one of the criteria used in making staff appointments, so that the faith character of the school may be effectively maintained.

In Voluntary Controlled and Foundations schools, governors may want to ask how potential headteachers will maintain and develop the religious character and ethos of the school. This does not necessarily mean that only members of that faith can be appointed to these leadership roles – for instance, there are VC Christian schools where the head is a Muslim, or of no faith and many VA Jewish schools where the head is of another faith or of no faith.

When appointing members of the teaching staff, governors of Voluntary Aided schools can include faith commitment as part of the criteria for the role. In practice, this is usually only the case for the leadership team, where the responsibility for enhancing the faith ethos of the school is a major aspect of their role.

For the appointment of teaching assistants and other non-teaching staff, if Voluntary Aided schools and Academies can establish a Genuine Occupational Requirement, they may be able to reserve the post for those with a faith commitment. This is particularly important in the case of higher level teaching assistants, whom may be teaching large groups or whole classes of students.