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New poll shows the debate on faith schools isn't really about faith

A survey by YouGov for the Westminster Faith Debates provides a reality check for both sides in the debate about faith schools.

Completed in June by 4,018 people, the survey offers little comfort for either those who defend or those who oppose faith schools. It shows that:

- Of those who express an opinion, a majority of people in GB are against state funding for faith schools, but for young people the reverse is the case
- Parents don't choose faith schools because of religion but because of academic standards
- Christian faith schools have more support than non-Christian faith schools, especially amongst older people and those who are more insular/less cosmopolitan in their general outlook
- Social class, gender, and political preference make little difference to opinion

NB All figures below are percentages

1. Only a third of people support state funding for faith schools in general

Only a third of the adult population, irrespective of voting intention, approve of state funding for faith schools. Nearly half actively disapprove, and the rest say they 'don't know'.

When asked about funding faith schools in general, political affiliation makes little difference to the level of approval.

State-supported 'faith schools' make up around a third of schools in Britain. Most are church schools (e.g. Church of England, Roman Catholic) and the rest (around 1%) are non-Christian (e.g. Jewish, Muslim, Hindu). Do you think the Government should or should not provide funding for faith schools?

		Voting intention		
Total	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	
32	34	35	36	
45	47	42	51	
23	19	22	13	

The Government should provide funding for these
the Government should NOT provide funding for these
Don't know



2. But young people are more positive about faith schools than older people

When asked if the government should provide funding for faith schools, 18-24 year olds are in favour by 43% to 36%, compared with those aged 40-59 who are opposed by 47% to 28%.

	Total	Age			
		18-24	25-39	40-59	60+
The Government <i>_should_</i> provide funding	32	43	31	28	32
the Government <i>_should NOT_</i> provide funding	45	36	40	47	50
Don't know	23	20	29	25	18

3. Only a quarter of parents say they would choose a faith school for a child

Only a quarter of people who might have a school-age child say they would send him or her to a faith school. There is little variation by class or region (except Scotland, which has a different school system).

A faith school is a school that provides a general education within a framework of a specific religious belief.

Imagine now that you had a child and were choosing a school for them... How likely or unlikely would you be to send your child to a faith school?

	Age			Social Grade	
	18-24	25-39	40-59	ABC1	C2DE

Very likely	9	6	8	9	9	9
Fairly likely	15	14	15	13	17	12
TOTAL LIKELY	24	20	23	22	26	21
Fairly unlikely	21	27	21	20	23	20
Very unlikely	38	36	39	41	37	41
TOTAL UNLIKELY	59	63	60	61	60	61
Don't know	16	16	17	17	14	18

4. The 'faith' part of faith schools is not what matters to most people

Overwhelmingly, people say that academic standards matter most in choosing a school. Values and religion count for far less.

If you were thinking about sending your child to a school in your local area, which two or three, if any, would influence your choice? (Please tick up to three)

Academic standards	77
Location of the school	58
Discipline records in the school	41

Ethical values	23
Prestige of the school	19
Grounding of pupils in a faith tradition	5
Transmission of belief about God	3
Something else	5
Don't know	9



5. It's acceptable for faith schools to "discriminate"

A majority of people don't object to faith schools discriminating on religious grounds in their admissions.

Faith schools are allowed to give preference in admissions to children and families who profess or practise the religion with which the school is affiliated. Do you think this is acceptable or unacceptable?

Acceptable	49
Unacceptable	38
Don't know	13

There isn't majority support for reforming proposals to make faith schools more mixed by admitting a quota from a different faith or none.

Some people have suggested that all faith schools should admit a proportion of students who follow a different religion or no religion at all. Do you think...?

All faith schools should have to adopt this policy	23
It is up to the school to decide whether to adopt this policy	30
It is better for faith schools to admit pupils only of the same faith	11
There should be no faith schools at all	26
Don't know	11

6. Lower levels of support for funding minority faith schools

When broken down by faith, the only kind of faith school which has a margin of support is Church of England (4%).

There is a margin of opposition of 7% against funding Catholic schools, 33% against Jewish and 40% against Islamic and Hindu school. See Appendix for details.

Young people are more positive than older people about funding non-Christian faith schools – e.g. 32% of 18-24 year olds support funding for Islamic schools compared with 16% of 40-59 year olds.

7. Summary of the factors that shape opinion

Although age has an effect on attitudes, overall strength of belief in God is the strongest factor. People who are certain there is a God are more than three times more likely to support funding for faith schools than are atheists. Although each group is a minority in society, they probably help fuel debate about faith schools.



In relation to attitudes towards non-Christian faith schools, being insular or 'little England' rather than cosmopolitan in outlook is the next strongest factor. Under 30s with a cosmopolitan outlook are more than twice as likely to be supportive of faith schools as over 30s with an insular outlook.

Linda Woodhead commented:

"In abstract debates about faith schools people talk about religion. Secular activists oppose faith schools on grounds of religious indoctrination and discrimination, while religious people support them because of the faith element. But our poll shows that when choosing a school most parents aren't concerned with religion. They are concerned with academic standards. So long as parents want their children to get the best qualifications, so long as politicians of left and right support parental choice and high academic standards, and so long as faith schools maintain these standards, the debate can rage, but faith schools are not going away."

Linda Woodhead, Professor of Sociology of Religion, Lancaster University

End

Notes to editors

The survey is available at <http://bit.ly/18bO9kP>

The survey was designed by Linda Woodhead and carried out online by YouGov. It was completed by 4018 people. Fieldwork was undertaken between 5th – 13th June 2013. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). Northern Ireland is not included.

The Westminster Faith debates are organised by Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead and supported by Lancaster University, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. They are designed to bring high-quality academic research on religion into public debate. http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/faith_debates-2013/

State-supported 'faith schools' (schools with a particular religious character) make up around a third of schools in England and Wales (Scotland has a different system, with state-funded schools being either non-denominational or Roman Catholic). Most faith schools in Britain are church schools (e.g. Church of England, Roman Catholic) and the rest (around 1%) are non-Christian (e.g. Jewish, Muslim, Hindu). Many 'faith schools' (notably Church of England voluntary controlled schools) are not in practice significantly different from non-faith schools. Under the Coalition government the number of Academies and Free Schools in England has expanded rapidly, and some of these are faith schools.



Appendix

Support for state funding broken down by type of school - % of total population

State-supported 'faith schools' make up around a third of schools in Britain. Most are church schools (e.g. Church of England, Roman Catholic) and the rest (around 1%) are non-Christian (e.g. Jewish, Muslim, Hindu). Do you the Government should or should not provide funding for the following faith schools?

Faith schools in general

The Government _should_ provide funding for these	32
the Government _should NOT_ provide funding for these	45
Don't know	23

Catholic faith schools

The Government _should_ provide funding for these	36
the Government _should NOT_ provide funding for these	43
Don't know	21

Church of England faith schools

The Government _should_ provide funding for these	42
the Government _should NOT_ provide funding for these	38
Don't know	20

Other Christian faith schools

The Government _should_ provide funding for these	34
the Government _should NOT_ provide funding for these	43
Don't know	22

Islamic faith schools

The Government _should_ provide funding for these	19
the Government _should NOT_ provide funding for these	60
Don't know	22

Hindu faith schools

The Government _should_ provide funding for these	19
the Government _should NOT_ provide funding for these	59
Don't know	22

Jewish faith schools

The Government _should_ provide funding for these	22
the Government _should NOT_ provide funding for these	55
Don't know	23