

'Faith schools proposals to avoid segregation should go further'

The Government's new proposals on faith schools seek to tackle segregation. But, unless they go further, they could well backfire and actually increase segregation.

This is the stark message in a submission made by Former Secretary of State for Education the Rt Hon Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead of Lancaster University in response to the Government's new consultation 'Schools that work for everyone'.

The consultation closes today (Monday 12 December).

The Government consultation includes a proposal to allow new faith-based free schools to select up to 100% of pupils based on their faith. Currently such schools can only admit half their pupils on the basis of faith, to foster inclusivity and avoid segregation. The new proposal would remove this 50% 'cap' so that schools may, for example, admit only children from families of the faith they wish to promote, say the authors of the submission

They add that this change is proposed chiefly to encourage faiths which wish to open new schools to do so and that the Government is responding to pressure from the Roman Catholic Church and some other faith leaders who say they will only open more schools if the cap is removed.

Faith schools currently make up a third of all schools in England.

Given the dangers of removing the cap and allowing 100% selection by faith, the Government proposes a number of measures to promote inclusivity, including appointing governors from another faith or none, and twinning schools.

In their submission, Clarke and Woodhead support the Government's measures to promote inclusivity, and affirm the importance of faith schools in the school system.

However, they urge the Government to:

- Extend the proposals to ensure greater inclusivity in *all* faith schools which select on the basis of faith (not just free schools but also academies and Voluntary Aided faith schools)
- Strengthen the implementation of the measures proposed to promote inclusivity in faith schools, for example by giving local SACREs¹ a role in supporting such inclusivity.
- Differentiate more clearly between faith schools which select on the basis of faith (e.g. most Catholic schools, and some Jewish and Muslim schools), and those which are open to all and serve the whole community (e.g. a majority of Church of England schools). The latter do not need the same safeguards as the former.
- Revisit the case for removing the 50% cap and review the reasons given.

In addition, the submission by Clarke and Woodhead urges the Government to take steps to establish a national syllabus for Religious Education (RE) which should be taught in all schools. This will put RE on the same rigorous, professional footing as other school subjects.

¹ Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education

They say this is the best way to equip children from any faith or none with an understanding of religion and religious diversity.

Introducing national standards for RE would also make it possible for OFSTED to inspect the religious aspect of the curriculum.

Parents, they add, should no longer have the right to remove their children from RE lessons simply because they do not want them to encounter other faiths.

Charles Clarke said: "I urge the government to take this opportunity to ensure that every faith school contributes strongly to the social cohesion of the communities of which they are a part. The issue is far broader and more significant than simply the small number of free schools."

Professor Woodhead said: "It is vital that schools do not encourage segregation. The Government's measures to promote greater inclusivity in a small number of faith schools are welcome, but should be strengthened and extended to all faith schools. The distinction between selective faith schools and those open to all should be acknowledged. Otherwise there is a danger that the proposals will result in greater segregation not less."

NOTES TO EDITORS

The government consultation was launched by the Secretary of State on September 12th, following a lecture by the Prime Minister on September 9th. The consultation paper is at:-

<https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-frameworks/schools-that-work-for-everyone/>

Over the past 5 years Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead have run, from Lancaster University, the 'Westminster Faith Debates' and in June 2015 published 'A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools' which addresses the current legal relationship between religion and schools in England, including the position of 'faith schools'. It can be found at:-

<http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/A-New-Settlement-for-Religion-and-Belief-in-schools.pdf>

The results of the consultation and the Department of Education's response will be published in spring 2017.

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