

Sir Michael Wilshaw
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector
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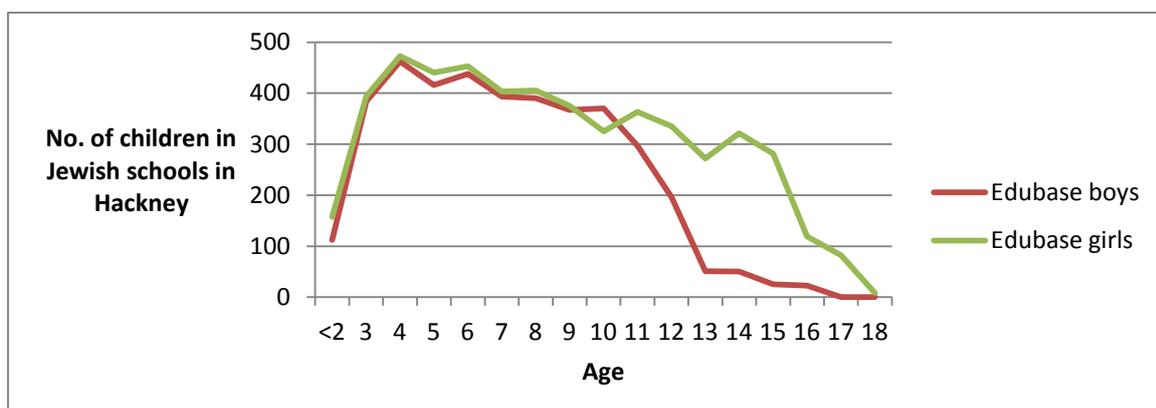
Dear Sir Michael,

I am writing to you in reference to the advice letter you recently sent to the Secretary of State for Education about Birmingham City Council children's services, the safeguarding of children, and the risks posed to children who are educated in unregistered schools and some independent 'faith' schools. Let me start by saying that I very much welcome the comments you have made in your letter, which build on the extremely positive work that Ofsted has been doing specifically to tackle the problem of unregistered schools.

In reference to the problems you have identified in Birmingham, as well as both Bradford and Luton, you state that 'troubling gaps in their knowledge' relating to how schools discharge their 'Prevent' duties, the monitoring of children who are being home-educated, the number of children who may be attending unregistered schools, and the whereabouts of pupils who have been removed from school rolls. Gaps in knowledge of this kind are indeed very troubling, wherever they are found, and these are issues that have gone unaddressed for a number of years now. I therefore wanted to alert you again to the situation in Hackney, where similar problems have also been ongoing for many years.

As you are no doubt aware, Hackney is home to a substantial Charedi Jewish community, and it is an open secret that a significant number of unregistered schools serving this community are operating in the borough. Both the nature of the education provided in these settings and the conditions within them will be well known to you. Indeed, Ofsted has inspected some of these settings in the past, and the few reports that are available from these inspections paint a troubling picture. You may also be aware that for various reasons, boys within the Charedi community (particularly between the ages of 11 and 16) are more at risk of missing education and being enrolled at unregistered schools than are girls.

Precise figures on how many boys in Hackney are subject to such risks are not available, but the graph below, showing the number of children by age receiving full-time education at registered Jewish schools in the borough, gives a clear indication as to the severity of the problem. The drop off from the age of 10-11 onwards is significant. (The numbers here are pulled from the Department for Education's database).



I note that previous efforts by Ofsted to alert both Hackney Council and the Department of Education (DfE) to the existence of these schools have not necessarily been met with the necessary action. In the case of Talmud Torah Tashbar for instance, the school was not ordered to close until after your inspectors had made repeated warnings over successive years, and even now the school continues to operate as it always has in flagrant violation of the closure order. Disappointingly, when we wrote to the DfE about this earlier in the year, their response was that they have been told that the school is 'now providing religious instruction only and that the children attending it are receiving secular education at home.' Anyone who has been to the school when children arrive early in the morning or when they leave late at night knows that this is palpably not true and nothing has changed.

We are mindful that the priority of the Government and of Ofsted is to mitigate the risk of children falling under the influence of extremist, potentially violent views, and that is right. However, we are firmly of the opinion that regardless of the threat of violence, relevant authorities have a duty to uphold the rights of children to a safe school, to a broad and balanced education, and to the protection of the state should their welfare be at risk. For the children in unregistered schools in Hackney, Birmingham, Bradford, and Luton, those rights are not being upheld. The response of authorities who are well aware of this has thus far been shameful.

You recommend to the Secretary of State at the end of your letter than one of Her Majesty's Inspectors 'be assigned to any local authority area where the government considers children are at risk of radicalisation or their safety is being put in jeopardy by poor safeguarding practices'. As this is clearly the case in Hackney, I would urge you to assign an inspector there too.

This is a complex issue and one which has failed to be resolved for a number of years. If you would like to discuss it further, I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you or your team.

Best wishes,

Andrew Copson
Chief Executive