

SUTTON TRUST CONSULTATION: COMPREHENSIVELY FAIR



Response from Humanists UK, May 2020

ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by over 85,000 members and supporters and over 100 members of the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

We have a long history of work in education, children's rights and equality, with expertise in the 'religion or belief' strand. We have been involved in policy development around the school and the curriculum for over 60 years. We also provide materials, advice, and ongoing support to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics, for example through our Understanding Humanism website (<https://understandinghumanism.org.uk/>), our school speakers programme, and our teacher training. We have made detailed responses to all recent reviews of the school curriculum, and submit memoranda of evidence to MPs, civil servants, and parliamentary select committees on a range of education issues including school admissions.

We are an active member of many organisations working on education and children's rights. These include the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE), the PSHE Association, the Sex Education Forum, and the Religious Education Council for England and Wales (REC).

RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

1. Does your school consider socio-economic background in your admissions policy? (if so, how does it do this?)

No response. Not applicable.

2. What kind of barriers does your school face in improving the socio-economic diversity of its intake?

Humanists UK is not a school, nor does it run or manage any. However, we are an organisation that campaigns against religiously selective admissions and in favour of fully inclusive state-funded schools that are open to all pupils regardless of background or belief. As such, we often work with parents who have effectively been shut out of their local schools by discriminatory admissions policies and we have conducted a significant amount of research into the impact of school admissions on fairness, diversity of intake, and social cohesion.

In our view, the current law permitting schools with a religious character to select pupils according to faith is not just discriminatory and unfair, but represents a key barrier to improving the



socio-economic diversity of all schools. There is a wealth of robust evidence¹ to demonstrate that religious selection not only segregates pupils by religion, but also along ethnic and socio-economic lines, as well as by prior attainment. As studies that control for pupil background show,² it is this, rather than a faith ethos, that accounts for any enhanced levels of attainment or performance in national league tables. However, this data tends to fuel the idea that faith schools are 'better' than other types of school and encourages parents (particularly the highly educated and those from more advantaged socio-economic groups) to use all the means at their disposal to gain a place, thus perpetuating what is effectively a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To put it another way, faith schools are socio-economically selective, because their religious admissions policies enable them to skim the richest, most advantaged pupils from their areas while the rest fail to meet their more complex admissions criteria. Evidence from our Fair Admissions Campaign shows that, overall, comprehensive secondaries with no religious character admit 5% more pupils eligible for free school meals than live in their local areas. But comprehensive Church of England secondaries admit 15% fewer; Roman Catholic secondaries 28% fewer; Jewish secondaries 63% fewer; and Muslim secondaries 29% fewer.³ Previous research by the Sutton Trust has also established a trend for faith schools to be some of the most socially selective, both at primary level,⁴ and among top-performing comprehensives.⁵

Religious admissions policies have also been demonstrated to segregate along ethnic lines. For example, Catholic schools take 4.4 % fewer Asian pupils than would be expected given the makeup of their local areas.⁶ Given the well-established relationship between poverty, disadvantage, and being a member of a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) group, it seems that the issue of socio-economic diversity simply cannot be addressed in the absence of acknowledging the detrimental impact of religiously selective admissions. Furthermore, all this is to say nothing of the impact of the religious segregation inherent to the exercise.

The Government's recent *Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper*⁷ notes both that there are faith schools that lack diversity and that insufficient opportunity to mix with those from differing backgrounds, robs individuals of the meaningful interactions necessary to build sustainable

¹For an overview see Accord Coalition, *Databank of Independent Evidence on Faith Schools* (2020) <<http://accordcoalition.org.uk/research/>> [accessed 13 May 2020] and Fair Admissions Campaign, *Research into religiously selective admissions criteria* (2017) <<http://fairadmissions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/2017-08-29-FINAL-Religious-Selection-Research-Survey.pdf>> [accessed 14 May 2020].

²See Education Policy Institute, *Faith Schools, pupil performance, and social selection* (2016) <<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/faith-schools-pupil-performance-social-selection/>> or Stephen Gibbons and Olmo Silva, Faith Primary Schools: Better Schools or Better Pupils', *Discussion Paper No. 72* from the Centre for the Economics of Education (CEE) at CEP <<http://cee.lse.ac.uk/cee%20dps/ceedp72.pdf>> or Humanists UK, 'Secondary league tables unfairly benefit religious schools by ignoring pupil backgrounds say academics' (2019) <<https://humanism.org.uk/2019/01/24/secondary-league-tables-unfairly-benefit-religious-schools-by-ignoring-pupil-backgrounds-say-academics/>> [accessed 12 May 2020].

³Fair Admissions Campaign, 'Overview of issues to do with religious selection in schools' (2015) <<http://fairadmissions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Overview-of-issues-to-do-with-religious-selection-in-school-admissions.pdf>> [accessed 12 May 2020].

⁴Rebecca Allen and Meenakshi Parameshwaran (for The Sutton Trust), *Caught Out: Primary schools, catchment areas and social selection* (2016) <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Caught-Out_Research-brief_April-16-1.pdf> [accessed 14 May 2020].

⁵Carl Cullinane, Jude Hillary, Joana Andrade and Stephen McNamara (for The Sutton Trust), *Selective Comprehensives 2017: Admissions to high-attaining non-selective schools for disadvantaged pupils* (2017) <<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Selective-Comprehensives-2017.pdf>> [accessed 12 May 2020].

⁶Fair Admissions Campaign, 'Overview of issues to do with religious selection in schools' (2015) <<http://fairadmissions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Overview-of-issues-to-do-with-religious-selection-in-school-admissions.pdf>> [accessed 12 May 2020].

⁷Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper* (2018) pp.26-27 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696993/Integrated_Communities_Strategy.pdf> [accessed 15 May 2020].



inter-communal relationships. Indeed, research from 2017 published on the DfE's own website⁸ shows that pupils in ethnically mixed schools are more trusting and have more positive views of children from different backgrounds than do pupils in segregated schools. Elsewhere, the authors of that same study argue that 'faith schools, to the extent that they are segregated, deprive young people of the opportunity to mix across ethnic and religious lines' in a manner that thwarts positive attitudes to members of so-called 'outgroups'.⁹

While the Government often claims that faith schools enhance parental choice, the opposite is often the case. A number of recent news stories highlight these difficulties, with some parents unable to secure a place at any local school¹⁰ because they all have a faith character which the family does not share and are therefore placed to the back of the queue. Other parents, particularly but not exclusively those in rural areas, have been forced to send their children to religious schools they don't want because of the over provision of such places in their area.¹¹

Although these issues may affect families from a variety of backgrounds, they are particularly acute for the non-religious, especially as 52% of British adults now identify as having no religion, with the number rising to 70% in those aged 18-24.¹² What's more, just 8% of adults consider religion to be an important factor when picking their children's schools¹³ with further evidence showing that 80% of the public (including 79% of Anglicans and 67% of Catholics) are actively opposed to religious schools being permitted to select all of their pupils according to faith.¹⁴

3. In your view, what would be the best way to improve socio-economic diversity in comprehensive schools? (e.g. random ballots, banding tests, prioritising pupil premium or other methods.)

Since this largely falls outside of our policy remit, we are agnostic about specifically which admissions practices would make for the fairest, most socio-economic diverse system in comprehensive schools. However, given the demonstrably detrimental impact religious selection has on socio-economic, ethnic, and religious diversity, we believe one of the best ways to improve the current situation would be to abolish that particular practice altogether. If this is considered too radical a solution, there should, at the very least, be some limit¹⁵ placed on the extent to which schools with a religious character are permitted to prioritise pupils on faith grounds. Here we note

⁸Miles Hewstone et al. *Diversity and Social Cohesion in Mixed and Segregated Secondary Schools in Oldham* (2017) <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/634118/Diversity_and_Social_Cohesion_in_Oldham_schools.pdf> [accessed 15 May 2020].

⁹Miles Hewstone et al. 'Influence of segregation versus mixing: Intergroup contact and attitudes among White-British and Asian-British students in high schools in Oldham, England' *Theory and Research in Education* (2018) Volume: 16 issue: 2, page(s): 179-203 <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1477878518779879>> [accessed 15 May 2020].

¹⁰ Nottingham Post, 'Mum fuming after son misses out on three schools due to his lack of faith' (2019) <<https://www.nottinghampost.com/news/nottingham-news/mum-fuming-after-son-misses-2601395>> [accessed 15 May 2020].

¹¹Manchester Evening News, 'Angry parents say children have been let down after they failed to get places at new high school' (2019) <<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/angry-parents-say-children-been-15961391>> [accessed 15 May 2020].

¹²Nat Cen, 'Church of England numbers at record low' (2018) <<http://natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2018/september/church-of-england-numbers-at-record-low/>> [accessed 15 May 2020]

¹³Westminster Faith Debates/You Gov, 'New poll shows that debate on faith schools isn't really about faith' (2013) <<http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/WFD-Faith-Schools-Press-Release.pdf>> [accessed 15 May 2020].

¹⁴Accord Coalition/ Populus, 'Religious schools survey' (2017) <<https://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Religious-Schools-Survey.pdf>> [accessed 15 May 2020].

¹⁵ Matthew Clayton, Andrew Mason, Adam Swift, and Ruth Wareham, 'The political morality of school composition' *British Journal of Political Science* pp. 1-18 (2019) <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/political-morality-of-school-composition-the-case-of-religious-selection/451C9FF2E62229E3160562228A45F157>> [accessed 15 May 2020].



that this is currently the case in free schools with a religious character, where there is a 50% cap on such selection.

Research we conducted when the Government consulted on a proposal to drop the admissions cap in 2016 found that the 50% cap had been incredibly successful in boosting ethnic integration in the vast majority of religious free schools, particularly Christian schools.¹⁶ On the relationship between socio-economic integration and the 50% cap specifically, the following research has been published:

- **The Sutton Trust** reported in 2017 that lifting the 50% cap 'is likely to make [faith schools] even more unrepresentative of their local areas, reducing the number of good school places available to pupils across the socio-economic spectrum'.¹⁷
- **The Education Policy Institute** concluded that 'if the objective of government policy is to increase social mobility, this policy intervention is unlikely to be effective'.¹⁸
- **The Institute for Community Cohesion Foundation** found that 'the evidence is unequivocal. Religious selection in school admissions is utterly deleterious for integration. And not just for religious integration but for socio-economic integration too'.¹⁹

Given the cap's efficacy, there is, therefore, good reason to think that, perhaps alongside other measures such as additional financial support and recognition for schools that actively recruit pupils from a wide range of backgrounds,²⁰ it should be extended to all schools with religious character, with 100% religious selection phased out across the state system.

Of course, while we recognise that, in some contexts, the problem of socio-economic homogeneity will not be fully addressed by the removal of or placing limits on religious selection, it would unarguably mark a huge step in the right direction. The admissions system simply cannot be made comprehensively fair unless careful attention is paid to the role of faith-based policies in creating the current unfairness.

4. Please provide any further comments.

No response.

For more details, information and evidence, contact Humanists UK:

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¹⁶Humanists UK, *Ethnic diversity in religious free schools* (2016) <<https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016-09-15-FINAL-Ethnic-diversity-in-religious-Free-Schools.pdf>> [accessed 15 May 2020].

¹⁷The Sutton Trust, '85% of top comprehensives with best GCSEs are socially selective, but schools where pupils make progress are much less so' (2017) <<http://www.suttontrust.com/newsarchive/85-of-top-comprehensives-with-best-gcse-are-socially-selective-but-schools-where-pupils-make-most-progress-are-much-less-so/>> [accessed 15 May 2020].

¹⁸Education Policy Institute, *Faith Schools, pupil performance, and social selection* (2016) <<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/faith-schools-pupil-performance-social-selection/>> [accessed 15 May 2020].

¹⁹ Ted Cantle, 'Religious selection in school admissions is utterly deleterious for integration' (2016) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2016/09/09/religious-selection-in-school-admissions-is-utterly-deleterious/>>

²⁰Matthew Clayton, Andrew Mason, Adam Swift, and Ruth Wareham, 'How to regulate faith schools' *Impact* (2018) <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/2048-416X.2018.12005.x>> [accessed 15 May 2020].

