

Ethnic diversity in religious free schools

November 2025

This research briefing examines ethnic diversity in state-funded religious secondary schools in England, focusing on the impact of the 50% cap on faith-based admissions that applies to religious free schools. It finds that faith schools subject to the 50% cap, particularly Church of England schools, tend to be more ethnically diverse than fully religiously selective schools.

The free school presumption, which requires new schools to be free schools – and so subject to the 50% cap – is set to be removed under the forthcoming Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill. Although it should be possible to remove the presumption while limiting all new schools to 50% religious selection, this is not what has been proposed. Instead, the change would allow new 100% religiously selective faith schools to open, reversing the success of the cap in promoting diversity. To prevent this, the cap should be extended to all new state-funded faith schools, regardless of type.

Introduction

Since 2007, all new academies (since 2011 known as free schools) with a designated religious character have been subject to a 50% cap on religious selection. This means that only half of these schools’ intakes can be admitted on faith-based criteria, with the remainder drawn from the local community. The rationale for the cap was to help facilitate social mixing between different ethnic and religious groups to promote social cohesion, as well as to enable better access to local schools for children and their families.

As of 2011, a rule that is sometimes known as the ‘free school presumption’ has required that virtually all new schools are free schools and so, effectively, every new religious school is currently subject to the cap. The Rishi Sunak Government [proposed to remove the cap in 2024](#), but following a consultation the new Labour Government [has decided to retain it](#).

The decision to keep the cap is to be applauded. However, provisions in the [Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#) currently passing through Parliament mean that, although the cap will be retained for new religious free schools, there will no longer be a free school presumption and consequently [100% selective faith schools will be able to open](#) when previously this wasn’t possible.

In light of the concern that the new Bill will lead to more fully selective faith schools, and building on [previous research we conducted in 2016](#), we have examined the issue of

ethnic diversity in these schools using recent school admissions policies¹ and data from the 2024 school census.

The results from our latest study – set out in the table and charts below – show that Church of England schools that select 100% of their pupils are less diverse than Church free schools subject to the 50% cap. [Christian schools account for 99% of all faith schools in England](#), meaning that changes to how these schools admit pupils are likely to affect a large number of families. However, the data also suggests that the cap may be having a positive impact on diversity in minority faith schools.

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

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¹ In most cases, these were the policies for the 2023/24 academic year. Where these were unavailable, the most recently published version on the school's website was used.

Ethnic diversity in 100% religiously selective faith schools² versus those subject to the 50% cap

Faith character	Number of Schools		Total Pupil Headcount		% White		% Mixed race		% Asian		% Black		% Other		% Unclassified	
	100 %	50% cap	100%	50% cap	100%	50% cap	100%	50% cap	100%	50% cap	100%	50% cap	100%	50% cap	100%	50% cap
Church of England	42	11	48,988	9,240	67%	55%	7%	11%	9%	14%	11%	8%	4%	9%	3%	3%
Other Christian	8	5	8,212	4,077	77%	78%	7%	7%	5%	2%	7%	4%	2%	3%	2%	5%
Hindu	0	2	0	2,275	N/A	2%	N/A	3%	N/A	94%	N/A	0%	N/A	1%	N/A	1%
Jewish	13	1	9,637	136	87%	57%	3%	8%	3%	16%	2%	5%	3%	7%	2%	7%
Muslim	5	12	3,109	7,536	1%	1%	2%	8%	88%	76%	2%	8%	5%	6%	1%	1%
Sikh	0	5	0	4,323	N/A	3%	N/A	7%	N/A	78%	N/A	4%	N/A	6%	N/A	2%
Roman Catholic	308	0	324,982	0	65%	N/A	7%	N/A	10%	N/A	13%	N/A	3%	N/A	2%	N/A
TOTAL	376	36	394,928	27,587	66%	31%	7%	8%	10%	46%	12%	6%	3%	6%	2%	2%

² By 100% religiously selective we mean schools whose admissions policies' oversubscription criteria allow 100% religious selection (excluding those who have this power by law but choose not to use it in their admissions policies). In order to determine which schools these are, we used the DfE's 2024 [Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics](#) data to identify religious secondary schools, and used school websites to check the admissions policy of each school.

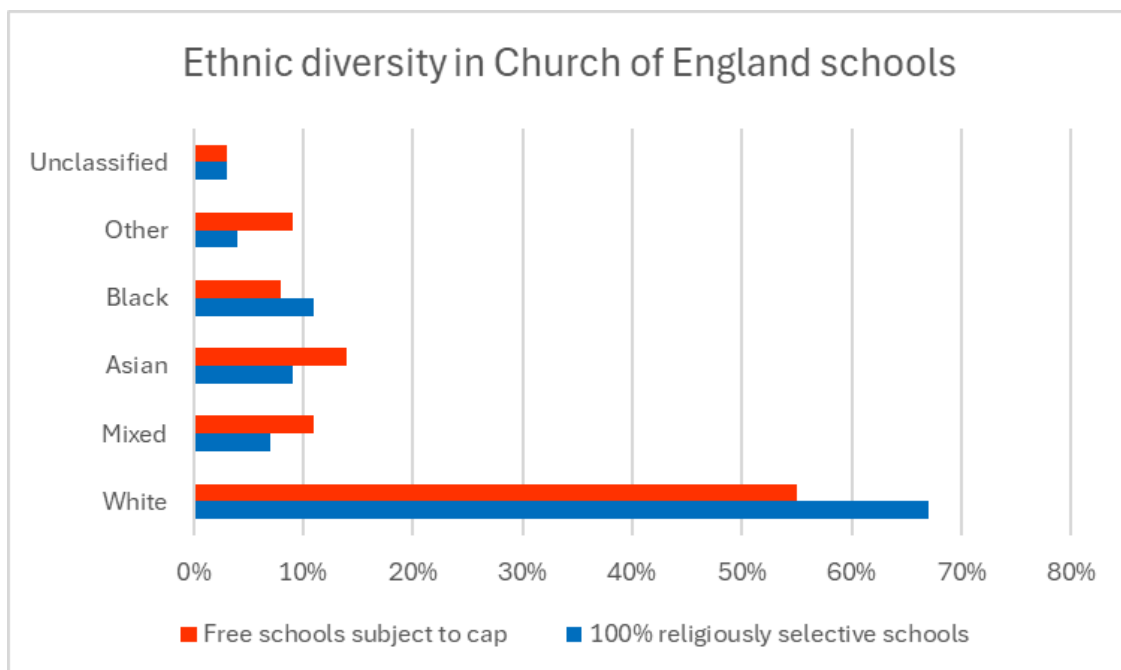
Church of England schools

After the Catholic Church, the Church of England runs the second largest number of secondary schools with a faith character in the country. 42 of its secondary schools are 100% selective. 48,988 pupils are attending state-funded CofE schools that, when oversubscribed, actively discriminate against children from other and non-religious backgrounds across every single school place they offer.

Our research demonstrates that:

- 67% of pupils in 100% religiously selective CofE schools are white, compared to 55% in CofE free schools.
- 7% of pupils in 100% religiously selective CofE schools are mixed race, compared to 11% in CofE free schools.
- 9% of pupils in 100% religiously selective CofE schools are Asian, compared to 14% in CofE free schools.
- 11% of pupils in 100% religiously selective CofE schools are black, compared to 8% in CofE free schools.
- 4% of pupils in 100% religiously selective CofE schools are of other ethnicities, compared to 9% in CofE free schools.

In other words, for most ethnic groups, the 50% cap still appears to be helping to make CofE schools more diverse nearly a decade after our original research was conducted.



Roman Catholic schools

The Roman Catholic Church has refused to open any schools under the 50% cap. This makes it impossible to do an equivalent comparison to the one for Church of England schools.

Other Christian schools

There aren't many schools with an 'Other Christian' religious character – just eight are fully selective and five are subject to the 50% cap. This makes comparisons less robust. However, the difference between fully selective and capped schools is minimal. For example, 77% of pupils in 100% selective schools are white, compared to 78% in free schools. These similarities may reflect the areas in which these schools are located rather than the effectiveness of the cap. Three of the five 'Other Christian' free schools are in local authorities where [over 85% of the population is white British](#),³ suggesting the cap may still be playing a positive role relative to the local context. Further research is needed to explore this possibility.

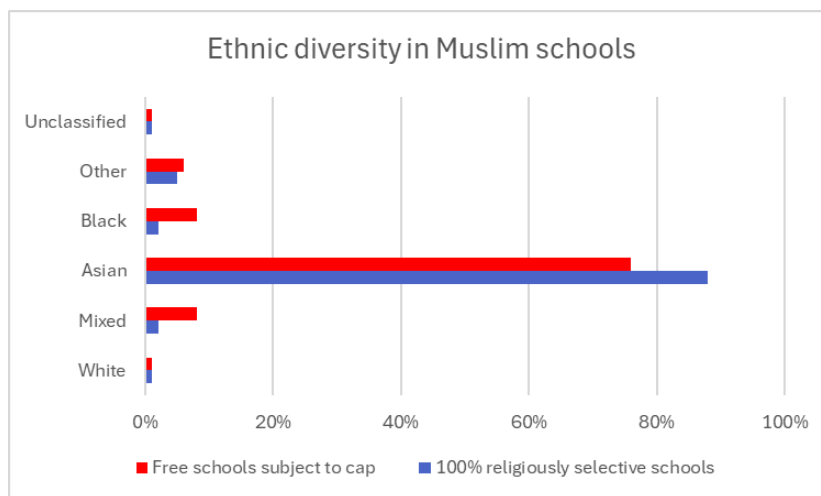
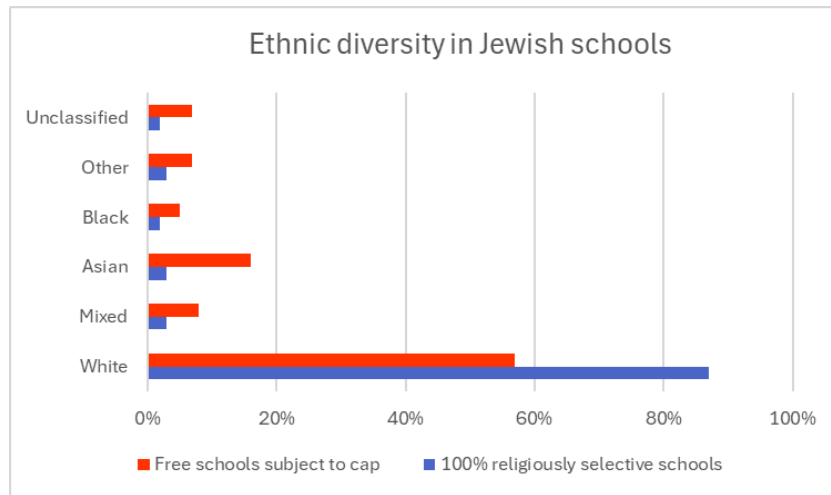
Minority religious schools

When the Conservative government proposed scrapping the cap, [a key reason it gave](#) was that the policy had failed to make minority faith schools more diverse, with the intake of pupils at free schools with a religious character 'largely made up of pupils of similar ethnic backgrounds'. However, our research shows that 87% of pupils attending Jewish schools that make use of 100% religiously selective admissions policies are white. And this figure drops to just 57% for the only Jewish free school subject to the cap.

Of course, since there is only one secondary free school with a Jewish character, it is important not to overemphasise this single data point. But when considered alongside the rest of the data, it does suggest that the cap may in fact be helping to increase diversity in minority faith schools.

Similarly, although both 100% religiously selective Muslim schools and Muslim free schools have very small proportions of white pupils (1% in both types of school), it appears that the cap is contributing to greater ethnic diversity amongst non-white pupils. 88% of pupils attending 100% selective Muslim schools are Asian, compared to 76% in Muslim free schools. Furthermore, 2% of pupils in 100% selective Muslim schools are black compared to 8% in Muslim free schools, and the figures for mixed race pupils are the same (2% in 100% selective schools and 8% in free schools). Again, the small number of 100% selective schools does mean these results need treating with some caution.

³ These are Wigan (91.8% white British), Sevenoaks, Kent (85.6% white British), and Great Yarmouth (88.9% white British).



Conclusion

This research illustrates that reduced religious selection tends to lead to greater ethnic diversity in schools with a religious character. What's more, this is increasingly not just the case for Christian schools, but also for minority faith schools.

With this in mind, it would be a mistake for the Government to enable 100% religiously selective schools to open as an unintended consequence of removing the free school presumption. Instead, the cap should be extended to cover all state-funded schools with a religious character. Although this would not solve the problem of ethnic diversity in faith schools, the evidence shows that it would improve the current situation. **The Government has a clear choice: it can either allow more 100% religiously selective schools to open, deepening segregation, or extend the cap to promote greater integration. We urge it to take the latter option.**