



## **Overview of issues to do with religious selection in school admissions**

The Fair Admissions Campaign wants all state-funded schools in England and Wales to be open equally to all children, without regard to religion or belief. The Campaign is supported by a wide coalition of individuals and national and local organisations. We hold diverse views on whether or not the state should fund faith schools. But we all believe that faith-based discrimination in access to schools that are funded by the taxpayer is wrong in principle and a cause of religious, ethnic, and socio-economic segregation, all of which are harmful to community cohesion and the common good.

### **Religious selection**

There are 658 religiously selective state secondary schools in England and Wales, which is 19% of all mainstream state secondary schools. 339 are Roman Catholic, 209 are Church of England (CofE) or Church in Wales, 60 are 'generically' Christian, 11 are Jewish and 9 are Muslim.

In 2013-14 and again in 2014-15 we examined all these admissions policies in order to establish, for the first time ever, the extent to which their oversubscription criteria permit religious selection. This research was published in December 2013.<sup>1</sup> We found that 72% of places at these schools (430,000), or 13% of all mainstream state secondary school places, are subject to religious selection, if the schools are sufficiently oversubscribed. From this we estimated that 17% of all mainstream state primary school places, or 770,000, are similarly religiously selective.

We found large variations in the degree of secondary religious selection. 99.8% of places at Roman Catholic schools are subject to religious selection, as were over 90% of places at both Jewish and Muslim schools. On the other hand just 10.9% of generically Christian and 49.7% of CofE places were religiously selected – but if we just focus on those CofE schools that are not subject to external restrictions on how religiously selective they can be<sup>1</sup> then the figure rises to 68%. 55 CofE secondaries do not have religiously selective admissions policies, 85 have partially selective and 66 have fully selective policies.

We also found large variation by location – with 59% of secondary places in the London borough of Kensington and Chelsea subject to religious selection, and a number of local authorities in the North West have around 40% of places selected in this way. On the other hand, eight have no such selection.

We also saw large variation by Church of England diocese, ranging from 84% in Liverpool down to 3% in Leicester. The Diocese of London, despite its commitments to ensuring all existing schools are at

---

<sup>1</sup> i.e. the Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools and Academies that were formerly VA or Foundation schools.

least 50% inclusive and all new schools are fully inclusive, in fact has 68% of places subject to religious selection.<sup>ii</sup>

Overall this comes to 16% of mainstream state school places being subject to religious selection – or 1.2 million in total. This is more than the number of places at private, single-sex and grammar schools, or places selected by ability or aptitude, combined.

By comparison to the 16% of places that are subject to religious selection, almost all at Christian schools, weekly church attendance by those of parent age stands at about 4%.<sup>iii</sup> It is commonly heard that religious selection drives attendance and some research bears this out. Sutton Trust research has found that 6% of parents, and 11% of London parents, have admitted to ‘Attend[ing] church services so that [their] child(ren) could enter a church school’. Those from higher social strata were also more likely to admit to having done this.<sup>iv</sup>

6% may not sound like a huge number, but it is more than 4%, and implies that school admissions is a large factor in driving church attendance amongst this demographic. Indeed, over the last few years the Church of England has conducted a major research programme called the Church Growth Research Programme, in order to identify what successfully causes churches to grow, so that this knowledge can be used to stimulate further growth elsewhere.<sup>v</sup> Academics carried out ‘a purpose-built survey of growing, stable and declining churches across all dioceses’. One of the questions asked was ‘Is this church linked to a Church of England school? [If yes] Is it over-subscribed?’ Analysing the results, the academics wrote that ‘The results for church growth are interesting. Here the Church school has a key role... The most direct impact on attendance may be felt in areas where a popular C of E school is over-subscribed. Some churchgoing is clearly motivated by a desire to qualify for school admission, but the boost to attendance may last into the longer term if families decide to stay.’ This was found to be statistically significant; the academics concluded that ‘Middle class suburbs with church schools... offer great opportunities [for growth].’<sup>vi</sup> Elsewhere they wrote that ‘Being connected with an over-subscribed school is helpful, if not easy to engineer!’<sup>vii</sup>

### **Socio-economic selection – our findings**

For all mainstream state secondary schools in England, we also examined the proportion of students who were eligible for free school meals and who spoke English as an additional language, and compared this to the schools’ local population.<sup>viii</sup>

We found that:

- Comprehensive secondary schools with no religious character admit 5% more pupils eligible for free school meals than live in their local areas. Comprehensive Church of England secondaries admit 15% fewer; Roman Catholic secondaries 28% fewer; Jewish secondaries 63% fewer; and Muslim secondaries 29% fewer.
- A clear correlation is found between the degree of religious selection and how socio-economically exclusive schools are. Comprehensive schools with no religious character typically admit 5% more pupils eligible for free school meals than would be expected given their areas. Religious comprehensives that do not select by religion typically admit 1% fewer, but those whose admissions criteria allow religious selection for all places typically admit 30% fewer.
- The correlation between religious and socio-economic selection holds even if we focus on comprehensive CofE schools alone: those that don’t select admit 1% fewer than would be expected, while those that fully select admit 35% fewer.

- The most segregated local authority as a result of religious selection is Hammersmith and Fulham. While 15% of pupils nationally are eligible for free school meals, the segregation between the religiously selective schools and other schools is almost double that (27 percentage points).
- Only 16% of schools select by religion but they are vastly overrepresented in the 100 worst offenders on free school meal eligibility and English as an additional language. They make up 46 of the worst 100 schools on FSM eligibility and 50 of the worst 100 on EAL. (If grammar schools, University Technical Colleges and Studio schools are excluded, religiously selective schools account for 73 of the worst 100 on FSM eligibility and 59 of the worst 100 on EAL.)

Much is written about the extent to which grammar schools are socio-economically selective. Our map suggests that each individual place at a grammar school causes almost twice as much socio-economic selection as each individual religiously selected secondary school place. But as there are more religiously selective secondary school places, *overall* religious selection causes more socio-economic selection at the secondary level than grammars do. And this is to say nothing about the primary level, where there is even more religious selection but no grammars – It's therefore likely that across both phases of the English state system, religious selection causes over twice as much socio-economic selection as grammars.

### **Socio-economic selection – the wider academic literature**

The wider academic literature supports our findings. In 2012 Shepherd and Rogers found similar patterns of low numbers of pupils eligible for FSM in English faith schools.<sup>ix</sup> 76% of Catholic primary schools and 65% of Catholic secondary schools were found to have a smaller proportion of pupils eligible for FSM than was representative of their postcode. 63.5% of Church of England primary schools and 40% of Church of England secondary schools were also found to have a smaller proportion eligible for FSM than was representative of their postcode. Although 40% perhaps does not sound particularly high on first reading, only 29% of secondary schools without a religious character were found to take a smaller proportion of pupils on FSM than was representative of their postcode. This means that both Catholic and Church of England secondary schools were significantly more likely than secondary schools without a religious character to have student bodies which under-represent students eligible for FSM, which corroborates the Fair Admissions Campaign research presented here.

Many studies have also found evidence that those faith schools which are their own admissions authorities (which are more likely to be religiously selective) exhibit a greater degree of socio-economic selection than other faith schools, and this is corroborated by our findings on faith schools that have not had any external restrictions on how religiously selective they can be. In 2007 Tough and Brookes found that 'Faith schools which are their own admission authorities are ten times more likely to be highly unrepresentative of their surrounding area than faith schools where the local authority is the admission authority.' They also found that 'Non-religious schools which are their own admissions authorities [which, at the time, were predominantly grammar schools] are six times more likely to be highly unrepresentative.'<sup>x</sup>

In 2011, Dr Richard Harris found that 'The proportion of pupils in the London data who were eligible for FSM in 2008 was 0.266. The mean (and median) proportion in... VA CoE schools... was 0.242 (0.181), in VA RC schools, 0.201 (0.174), and in schools of the other faith group, 0.138 (0.128). Each of these school types is, on average, recruiting disproportionately few FSM-eligible pupils, with the proportion for VA CoE schools closest to the expected value. Insofar as FSM eligibility is a marker of economic disadvantage, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that... faith schools, on average, are socially selective.'<sup>xi</sup>

Extensive research on this issue has also been conducted by Dr Rebecca Allen and Professor Anne West. In August 2011, they reported that ‘schools with a religious character (or faith schools) have fewer FSM pupils and more top ability pupils and that, in general, they are more affluent in their intake than the neighbourhoods they are located in.’<sup>xii</sup> In 2009, they concluded that ‘It is clear from our analysis that many religious secondary schools in London are not serving the most disadvantaged pupils. Overall, religious schools educate a much smaller proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and their intakes are significantly more affluent than the neighbourhood in which they are located.’<sup>xiii</sup> And in 2008, when being interviewed by the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, Rebecca Allen noted that ‘In my most recent research... I was able to show that religious schools have higher ability and lower free school meal intakes compared with the neighbourhoods in which they are located. To give you an idea of the magnitude of those effects, if we take a community school and a voluntary-aided religious school, both located in a neighbourhood with exactly the same levels of deprivation, the community school is likely to have about 50% more free school meal children than the voluntary-aided school... We can show that there really is a direct correlation between the number of potentially selective admissions criteria that schools use, and the extent to which their intakes are advantaged.’<sup>xiv</sup>

Finally, in their 2010 report *Unlocking the Gates*, Barnardo’s found that their ‘services in Bradford and Luton have found themselves advising increasing numbers of newly arrived eastern European families in recent years. While these families are often devout Catholics and wish their children to attend a faith school, they can struggle to meet the priority admissions criteria for local Catholic secondary schools. In Luton for example, some have only recently arrived or have moved around the city and therefore have not had consistent enough attendance at a particular church to be able to gain the required reference from a priest; others are denied admission because they failed to gain entry (particularly if they arrived mid-year) into a Catholic primary school which operates as a “feeder” to the secondary school.’<sup>xv</sup>

### **Responses from the churches to the evidence on socio-economic selection**

The main response to this evidence from religious groups is that our and others’ ‘local’ comparisons look too locally. The catchment areas for religiously selective schools are geographically wider than other schools – even than some local authorities. Therefore, the argument goes, schools are being compared to geographic areas that are too small.

As a result the Church of England likes to compare its schools to national statistics, even though this is looking too widely, where the disparity between its schools and the overall picture differs less and where difference in selectivity between its religiously selective and other schools is ignored.<sup>xvi</sup> The Catholic Education Service likes to cite a figure other than free school meal eligibility, namely the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), which ranks children based on how deprived their local areas are (measuring this against the same range of indicators as determines whether a pupil is eligible for free school meals). It points to the fact that more pupils come from the 10% most deprived areas than do so at other schools.<sup>xvii</sup>

But these responses fail to consider that religiously selective secondary schools are more likely to be in cities, where the percentage of the population that is eligible for free school meals is higher. Therefore, if they were taking a proportionate share of pupils thus eligible, one would expect their schools to take more children eligible for free school meals and in the most deprived areas than the average school. Indeed, the Fair Admissions Campaign looked up all schools themselves on IDACI, and found that actually Catholic schools are even more likely still to be in the most deprived areas

than the pupil figures suggest – i.e. the IDACI figures again show under-take of the most deprived pupils by Catholic schools.<sup>xviii</sup>

As for arguments that our map looks too closely, we have also compared schools to their local authorities, their neighbouring local authorities, their regions and the nation as a whole. It is only with the last of these that Catholic schools start looking a bit more inclusive (but still somewhat uninclusive); Muslim schools start to look more inclusive when comparing with neighbouring local authorities (reflecting the fact that all are all in northern or Midlands cities, where the cities themselves are a lot more deprived than the surrounding countryside); while CofE schools that select and Jewish schools look uninclusive even when comparing nationally. All in all then, this shows that we are not looking too closely but there are real problems here.

## Ethnic selection

The evidence on ethnic selection is more complicated as it is tied up to a greater extent in religio-ethnic demographics. There is strong evidence that minority faith schools are the most racially segregated state schools,<sup>xix</sup> but this seems to be primarily a result of parental choice and not religious selection *per se*. In Christian schools, however, unpublished research suggests that the inclusivity of schools of their local Asian populations is determined to some extent by how religiously selective the schools are – for example, Church of England schools are less inclusive of Asian pupils when they religiously select to a greater extent. Catholic schools take 4.4 percentage points fewer Asian pupils than would be expected given their local areas.

(More generally it is the case that most Sikh, Hindu and Muslim schools take no white British pupils at all, compared to a third of their local populations being white British, while two-thirds of Jewish schools take no Asian pupils at all, compared to 13% of their local populations being Asian. Schools with no religious character do not in any way see similar problems.<sup>xx</sup> This speaks to wider problems than just religious selection.)

Many reports in the wake of the racially motivated summer riots of 2001 claimed that the ethnic divisions between schools were a key cause of the riots. For example the *Cantle Report*, commissioned by the Home Office, noted how riots had not arisen in diverse areas, such as Southall and Leicester, where pupils learnt about different religions and cultures in local schools, and was concerned that some schools appeared to be ‘operating discriminatory policies where religious affiliations protect cultural and ethnic divisions’.<sup>2,xxi</sup> At the launch of the 2009 *Cantle Report* on Blackburn, Professor Ted Cantle said that faith schools are ‘automatically a source of division which have to be overcome.’<sup>xxii</sup> Professor Cantle is now on the steering group of the Fair Admissions Campaign.

## Popularity of religious selection

A November 2012 survey by ComRes commissioned by the Accord Coalition found that 73% of British adults think that ‘state funded schools should not be allowed to select or discriminate against prospective pupils on religious grounds in their admissions policy’. Only 18% think that they should, whereas 9% are unsure. This means that opposition to such selection stands at more than four to one.<sup>xxiii</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The report suggested that schools ‘should offer, at least 25%, of places to reflect the other cultures or ethnicities within the local area.’

Many people find this counter-intuitive, as they think of their local religiously selective schools and see them as popular. But as a matter of fact, not many parents at all choose schools on the basis of religion. One survey a few years ago asked parents to pick their top three factors from a list of twelve for choosing which school to send their children to, and only 9% picked religion.<sup>xxiv</sup> Performance was far and away the most important factor, with location, facilities, class sizes and curriculum also being important. Another survey asked something similar and got similar results. 'Ethical values' was considered important by 23% of respondents, although not every respondent who picked this would have meant religious values by this; just 5% picked 'Grounding of pupils in a faith tradition' and 3% picked 'Transmission of belief about God'.<sup>xxv</sup>

In 2009 the House of Commons Research Library concluded that any difference in academic performance between faith schools and other schools is totally attributable to the different intakes of each school, which, it said, is 'due to parental self-selection and selection methods used by some faith schools'.<sup>xxvi</sup> This conclusion has been reinforced since by Steve Gibbons and Olmo Silva whose 2011 paper 'Faith Primary Schools: Better Schools or Better Pupils?' found that 'pupils progress faster in Faith primary schools, but all of this advantage is explained by sorting into Faith schools according to preexisting characteristics and preferences... there is no unambiguous performance advantage that cannot be attributed purely to pupil-side sorting into these schools or to school-side selection of pupils likely to show the fastest progress'.<sup>xxvii</sup> In addition, Allen and Vignoles' 2010 study of faith schools' effect on local areas finds significant evidence that religiously selective schools are associated with higher levels of pupil sorting across schools, but no evidence that competition from faith schools raises area-wide pupil attainment.<sup>xxviii</sup> Even the Christian think tank Theos, in its report *More than an Educated Guess: Assessing the evidence on faith schools* concluded that 'The research seems to support the claim that students in faith schools, generally do fare better academically than their counterparts in non-faith schools. At the moment, the body of evidence appears to suggest this is probably primarily the outcome of selection processes'.<sup>xxix</sup>

So: religious selection is not popular. High-performing schools are popular. And socio-economic selection through religious selection often leads religiously selective schools to be high-performing schools.

## References

---

<sup>i</sup> 'Groundbreaking new research maps the segregating impact of faith school admissions', Fair Admissions Campaign, 3 December 2013: <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/groundbreaking-new-research-maps-the-segregating-impact-of-faith-school-admissions/> – accompanied by the Fair Admissions Campaign's map: <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/map/>

<sup>ii</sup> See Diocese of London entry at <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/our-supporters/what-others-say/>

<sup>iii</sup> Siobhan McAndrew, Church Attendance in England, 1980-2005, *British Religion in Numbers*, 23 March 2011: <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2011/church-attendance-in-england-1980-2005/> – shows weekly church attendance amongst all ages in 2005 was 6.3%. Church attendance has fallen since (as demonstrated by, for example, the Church of England's annual *Statistics in Mission*), and is lower amongst younger adults than those 65+, hence the estimate of 4%.

<sup>iv</sup> Francis, Becky and Hutchings, Merryn, *Parent Power? Using money and information to boost children's chances of educational success*, Sutton Trust, December 2013: <http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/1parentpower-final.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> 'About the Programme', Church Growth Research Programme: [http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/about\\_the\\_programme](http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/about_the_programme)

<sup>vi</sup> Voas, David, and Watt, Laura, *Numerical change in church attendance: National, local and individual factors*, The Church Growth Research Programme Report on Strands 1 and 2, February 2014: [http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/Report\\_Strands\\_1\\_2\\_rev2.pdf](http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/Report_Strands_1_2_rev2.pdf)

- 
- <sup>vii</sup> Voas, David, *Numerical Change in Church Attendance: National, Local and Individual Factors*, presentation at the Faith in Research: From Anecdote to Evidence conference, January 2014: [http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Presentations/CGRP\\_Voas.pdf](http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Presentations/CGRP_Voas.pdf)
- <sup>viii</sup> You can see more details about this, including what we mean by 'local', at 'Groundbreaking new research maps the segregating impact of faith school admissions', Fair Admissions Campaign, 3 December 2013: <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/groundbreaking-new-research-maps-the-segregating-impact-of-faith-school-admissions/> and the FAQs of the Fair Admissions Campaign's map: <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/map/>
- <sup>ix</sup> Shepherd, Jessica and Rogers, Simon, 'Church schools shun poorest pupils', *The Guardian*, 5 March 2012: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/mar/05/church-schools-shun-poorest-pupils>
- <sup>x</sup> Tough, Sarah and Brookes, Richard, *School Admissions: Fair choice for parents and pupils*, IPPR, June 2007: <https://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=546>
- <sup>xi</sup> Harris, Richard, 'Geographies of transition and the separation of lower and higher attaining pupils in the move from primary to secondary school in London', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Volume 38, Issue 2, pages 254–266, April 2012: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2012.519.x/abstract>
- <sup>xii</sup> Allen, Rebecca and West, Anne, 'Why do faith secondary schools have advantaged intakes? The relative importance of neighbourhood characteristics, social background and religious identification amongst parents', *British Educational Research Journal*. Vol. 37, 4, pp. 691-712, August 2011: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/32192/>
- <sup>xiii</sup> Allen, Rebecca and West, Anne, 'Religious schools in London: school admissions, religious composition and selectivity', *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 35, 4, pp. 471-494, August 2009: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/25635/>
- <sup>xiv</sup> Oral evidence by Rebecca Allen to the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee on Diversity of Schools: Faith Schools, 12 March 2008: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmchilsch/c311-iii/c31102.htm>
- <sup>xv</sup> *Unlocking the gates: Giving disadvantaged children a fairer deal in school admissions*, Barnardo's Policy and Research Unit, 23 August 2010: [http://www.lgcplus.com/Journals/3/Files/2010/8/27/unlocking\\_the\\_gates.pdf](http://www.lgcplus.com/Journals/3/Files/2010/8/27/unlocking_the_gates.pdf)
- <sup>xvi</sup> See e.g. 'Fair Admissions Campaign response to John Pritchard's comments on the inclusivity of Church schools', Fair Admissions Campaign, 19 November 2013: <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/fair-admissions-campaign-response-to-john-pritchards-comments-on-the-inclusivity-of-church-schools/>
- <sup>xvii</sup> See e.g. 'Catholic schools and the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index', Fair Admissions Campaign, 1 May 2014: <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/catholic-schools-and-the-income-deprivation-affecting-children-index/>
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xix</sup> 'Religious schools most racially segregated state schools, new findings show', British Humanist Association, 18 October 2013: <https://humanism.org.uk/2013/10/18/religious-schools-racially-segregated-state-schools-new-findings-show/>
- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxi</sup> Cantle, Ted et al, *Community Cohesion: A Report by the Independent Review Team chaired by Ted Cantle* (Home Office, 7 December 2001): <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2001/12/11/communitycohesionreport.pdf>
- <sup>xxii</sup> Moseley, Tom, *Cantle report: Blackburn a divided town* (*Lancashire Telegraph*, 8 May 2009): [http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/4351852.Cantle\\_report\\_Blackburn\\_a\\_divided\\_town/](http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/4351852.Cantle_report_Blackburn_a_divided_town/)
- <sup>xxiii</sup> 'Nearly three quarters of the British public disagrees with religious selection in admissions at state funded schools', Accord Coalition, 12 November 2012: <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/2012/11/12/nearly-three-quarters-of-the-british-public-disagrees-with-religious-selection-in-admissions-at-state-funded-schools/>
- <sup>xxiv</sup> YouGov / Daybreak Survey Results, 13 September 2010: [http://cdn.yougov.com/today\\_uk\\_import/YG-Archives-Life-YouGov-DaybreakReligion-130910.pdf](http://cdn.yougov.com/today_uk_import/YG-Archives-Life-YouGov-DaybreakReligion-130910.pdf)
- <sup>xxv</sup> YouGov/University of Lancaster Survey Results, 5-13 June 2013: [http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/4n6d3tnayp/YG-Archive-University-of-Lancaster-Faith-Matters-Debate-results-180613-faith-schools.pdf](http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/4n6d3tnayp/YG-Archive-University-of-Lancaster-Faith-Matters-Debate-results-180613-faith-schools.pdf)
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Bolton, Paul, and Gillie, Christine, *Faith schools: Admissions and performance - Commons Library Standard Note*, House of Commons Library, 10 March 2009: <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN04405>
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Gibbons, Stephen and Silva, Olmo, 'Faith Primary Schools: Better Schools or Better Pupils?', *Journal of Labor Economics*, Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 589-635, July 2011: <http://www.istor.org/discover/10.1086/659344?uid=3738032&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21102555699737>

---

<sup>xxviii</sup> Allen, Rebecca and Vignoles, Anna, *Can school competition improve standards? The case of faith schools in England*, Department of Quantitative Social Science, Institute of Education, 29 June 2010:  
<http://repec.ioe.ac.uk/REPEc/pdf/qsswp0904.pdf>

<sup>xxix</sup> Oldfield, Elizabeth, Hartnett, Liane, and Bailey, Emma, *More than an Educated Guess: Assessing the evidence on faith schools*, Theos, 30 September 2013:  
<http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/files/files/More%20than%20an%20educated%20guess.pdf>