

backwords

The big debate

SHOULD FAITH SCHOOLS STILL PLAY A ROLE IN OUR CURRENT EDUCATION SYSTEM?

Teachers' unions and politicians are debating the future for state funding for faith schools. Supporters say the results show that faith schools work and the education debate should move on. Opponents say they are divisive, and fail to provide an unbiased education



Oona Stannard, Chief Executive & Director, Catholic Education Service

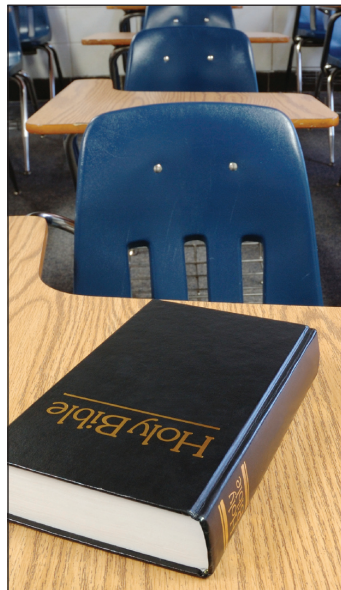
Education has always been a big political hot potato. Everyone has experienced the educational system and everyone tends to feel that they are an education expert. Add to this potent mix the media's tendency towards attention grabbing headlines and you have at best, a recipe for benign confusion and at worst, mischievous bias.

As an expert who has worked across all types of education, including 10 years as an HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education), I believe that there are overriding principles to bear in mind in this debate. Firstly, that faith schools work, and secondly that we need to support one another and work hard to ensure that every child's right to a good education is honoured, in whatever type of school, with the continued choice that characterises the current system and respects the wishes of parents.

A 2009 *Guardian*/ICM poll revealed that, of a pool of more than one thousand respondents, 60 per cent of those surveyed thought children benefit from a faith-based education, while 69 per cent of those with school-age children supported a religious ethos at school.

If faith schools were to be abolished, it would be going against what the majority of the British public want. Eliminating faith from education would only divide society further by undermining those parents who wish their children to experience an education rooted in faith.

Instead of investing too much time deliberating over faith schools, all of us in education would be better placed putting our energies behind getting the necessary resources and



successful outcomes deserved by each and every pupil. Let us pay more attention to what unites us and what we can share in common so that schools should be places where pupils can flourish and where teachers can enjoy the respect they deserve.



Norman Ralph, President of the AHS (National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies)

A recent study produced by the London School of Economics and the Institute of Education concluded that faith schools not only fail to improve standards but also reinforce social fragmentation.

The AHS is opposed to faith schools. Not just because they have failed to create an education market in which schools improve by competing for students, as the government hoped, but because they

are divisive, discriminatory, against the ethos of learning and ultimately in frequent breach of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Faith schools are exempted from equality laws and allowed to use discriminatory selection techniques for students and staff. This segregates children into groups rather than allowing them to mix and find out about one another's backgrounds. This does not prepare them for multicultural society and ultimately has a negative effect on social cohesion.

Faith schools also have more control over what they teach children about religion, science and sex education. Last week the government received praise for making sex and relationships education compulsory in schools, on the grounds that it demonstrably improves the health and wellbeing of young adults. However, faith schools are exempted from the law. They are free not to teach the subject or choose the content of lessons, rather than providing unbiased and objective information.

In some schools, faith can even spill over into the teaching of creationism in science lessons. At Emmanuel College, Gateshead a science teacher was exposed after telling staff to explain away evidence for evolution and the age of the earth using "Biblical explanations".

The AHS agrees with the many studies and campaigning groups who say that schools should be open to all, regardless of belief or religious upbringing, and that all children should have the right to a full and unbiased education. ■

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Have your say. Should faith schools continue to thrive? Email: bigdebate@bigissuenorth.co.uk or write to *The Big Debate, The Big Issue in the North, 10 Swan St, Manchester M4 5JN. We will publish a selection of views.*

Dear Editor...

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ZIONISM DEBATE

I write as a member of Jews for Justice for Palestine in response to the two letters from Zionists you have printed to date (issues 768, 769).

Contrary to the Zionist mythology I was raised with, Israel did not arise as a land without people for a people without land. During the British mandate, Israel's "war of independence" consisted of attacks by Irgun and Haganah – organisations regarded as "terrorist" by the British and, after 1948, as heroes by the Israelis. After 1948 most Palestinians fled or were driven from their villages – becoming refugees on what was the West Bank of Jordan and Gaza. Their villages were erased or taken over by Israel and either demolished or built on.

Those who remained became Israeli citizens – for many that is second-class Israeli citizenship – living in villages outside Israeli towns (they don't attend schools with their Israeli counterparts) and far less of Israel's budget is spent on their schools, water systems and health services. They are not permitted to serve in the Israeli army, which means that Israeli employees can practice a form of racist discrimination by insisting that posts are filled by those who have served.

They are denied planning permission to build homes so that if they do build, the Israeli government has an excuse to move in with the bulldozers and demolish them. Clearly this "separate development" is not that far short of apartheid.

Israeli settlements in the West Bank are in breach of UN resolutions and have taken Palestinian land – providing the settlements with water and infrastructure. And the West stands back and does nothing other than mouth platitudes while Israel is permitted to get away with it.

The outrageous bombing of Gaza was clearly in breach of the rules of war and the Geneva Conventions – amounting to collecting punishment