

Comprehensive Future

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**Immediate release from Comprehensive Future
22 May 2007**

**Comprehensive Future Seminar
Faith Schools – selection by the back door?
5.30pm to 7pm.
Room C, 1 Parliament Street,**

Speakers

- Rev Janina Ainsworth, Church of England Chief Education Officer
- Sarah Tough, IPPR, co-author of the recent report on school admissions
- Professor Anne West, London School of Economics

A seminar tonight will hear results of a pilot research project commissioned by Comprehensive Future.

The aims of the research, by Professor Anne West, Hazel Pennell and Audrey Hind of the Education Research Group, Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science, were to -

- establish the religious composition of publicly-funded secondary schools in London with a religious character; and
- examine the admissions policies, and in particular, whether the schools concerned give priority to children of other faiths in their admissions criteria, including nominally setting aside a number of places for children not of the school's faith or of no faith.

The researchers concluded that -

- The analysis of the religious composition of schools with a religious character in London found that the student mix varied. Overall, Church of England schools were more religiously inclusive than Roman Catholic schools.
- If community cohesion is to be fostered, schools with a religious character should be inclusive of all religions (or no faith). At present this is not the case. Major tensions arise in balancing policies that aim to increase the number of faith schools and promote religious inclusion. These are not easily resolved in a pluralist society, but given that public money is used to fund schools with a religious character there is a strong case to be made for such schools to be open to the wider community in the interests of enhancing social cohesion.

The research findings–

Religious composition

- There were differences in the religious composition of schools that were Church of England, Roman Catholic, Jewish and of other Christian denominations.
- In Church of England schools, around seven out of ten pupils were reported to be Christian; just under one in ten to be Muslim and a similar proportion to be of no faith (for the remainder, no information was available).
- In Roman Catholic schools, over nine out of ten pupils were reported to be Christian. Very small percentages were of other religions or no faith.
- In the three Jewish schools, all pupils were reported to be Jewish. In the two schools of other Christian denominations, around eight out of ten pupils were reported to be Christian.

Supplementary forms

- Supplementary forms were available for 24 of the 44 Roman Catholic and Church of England schools. All required a reference from a priest/minister/religious leader to confirm that the information provided by parents on their religious background and practice was accurate. Eight out of ten forms sought information on church attendance; half on involvement in the church and a third asked for proof that a child's religious milestones, such as baptism or first holy communion had taken place.

Comparison of the supplementary forms with the local authority forms found that the former, in general, were more complex than the latter: they were longer and more space was provided for parents to give reasons why they wanted their child to attend the school. In some cases personal information was sought such as parents' occupation, details of the schools attended by all other children in the family or other schools they were applying to. However, some forms were brief and simple to complete: they asked for basic details about the child, their parents/carers and a church contact so that a religious reference could be sought. The School Admissions Code (DfES, 2007), which applies to admissions from September 2008 prohibits the use of supplementary forms or information forms that ask:

for any personal details about parents, such as criminal convictions or marital, occupational or financial status; for details about parents' achievements, educational background or whether their first language is English; for details about parents' or children's disabilities, special educational needs or medical conditions, unless this is in support of positive action...; about parents' or children's interests, hobbies or membership of societies (this does not apply to membership or participation in activities as part of religious observance or practice at schools designated as having a religious character) DfES School Admissions Code 2007

Inclusion and community cohesion

- Further analyses were undertaken of the admissions processes used by schools that appeared to be inclusive of other faiths. It was found that they tended to set aside a proportion of places for those of other faiths/no faith, by dividing the available places between 'foundation' and 'open places.' On the other hand, the school with the highest proportion of non-Christian faiths was a Church of England school that did not set aside places in this way.
- Schools that were inclusive of other religions were not necessarily inclusive in other respects. In particular, an analysis of admissions criteria and supplementary admissions forms used suggested that, in some cases, they offered schools opportunities for social selection.

Notes

1. In 2006, the London School of Economics and Political Science was commissioned by Comprehensive Future, with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Limited, to carry out an independent pilot research project to examine the religious composition and admission processes of publicly-funded secondary schools with a religious character in London. The context for the research was the Labour government's aim to increase the number of faith-based schools and the fact that there is no information available about the composition of publicly-funded secondary schools with a religious character in terms of the religion of the pupils enrolled. London was chosen as the location for this research given its religiously diverse population and the high proportion of publicly-funded religious schools in the capital.
2. A short questionnaire was sent to all voluntary-aided secondary schools and academies in London that were classified by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as having a religious character (N=106). This asked for the numbers of pupils on roll at the school that were of different religions or no religion. Fifty schools/academies (47 per cent) provided useable information. Religious admissions criteria used by the schools were also analysed as were a sample of supplementary forms used by schools with a religious character. The admissions processes used by schools that appeared to be inclusive of other faiths (or no faith) were also examined.
3. Comprehensive Future is the campaign for fair school admission policies in England. The campaign is non party political and open to all. By lobbying Government, providing evidence, informing the media and supporting local campaigns on admissions we aim to bring about a comprehensive secondary school system in England with fair admissions criteria to all publicly funded schools, guaranteeing an equal chance to all children and an end to selection by ability and aptitude. Our individual supporters include school staff and governors, parents, members of both Houses of Parliament, local councillors, academics and other public figures who share a commitment to equality of opportunity within our education system. We also have support from organisations such as union branches and local political parties. For more information and to join, go to our website: www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk, email: info@comprehensivefuture.org.uk, phone: 020 8947 5758 or write to: Comprehensive Future PO Box 44327 London SW20 0WD

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