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**Local schools for open communities: inclusive admissions in voluntary controlled faith schools**

Thank you for your interest in this campaign and taking time to explore how you may be able to make faith schools in your area more open and inclusive.

Schools should be at the centre of any community and be as diverse a place as the local area from which they draw its pupils, where parents mix at the school gates and where children mix and learn together.

Unfortunately though, due to special legislative arrangements, local authorities are permitted to allow voluntary controlled faith schools in their jurisdiction to admit children on religious grounds in their admissions policy if the school is over subscribed, meaning that these schools can discriminate against children because of their and their family’s beliefs.

Most councils ensure that their voluntary controlled faith schools *do not* admit children on religious grounds. However, if your council is one of the significant minority of councils that do permit such discrimination to take place then this guide offers ideas and advice on how to campaign to change this.

You can copy any pages or text from this guide for use in your campaign. If you have any queries or decide to take action in your local area then please contact us via the contact details at top of this page. The contents of this guide are as follows:

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**Why is religious discrimination in school admissions wrong?**

Firstly, such discrimination is wrong because it simply is discrimination. Although the legality of whether faith schools can discriminate against pupils and their families on religious grounds in their admissions is contested, faith schools have in effect exemptions from various pieces of equality and human rights legislation that would otherwise more clearly prevent them from operating in this way.

However, discrimination in pupil admissions should also be opposed because of the wider damage it can cause to society. By dividing and segregating children on religious grounds in schools we create environments where children grow up more removed from those of different backgrounds, and this can help to create communities where mistrust between groups can more readily grow and store up problems for the future in terms of community cohesion. Division on the grounds of religion also has added complexity, as it can serve as a proxy for division on the grounds of race and ethnicity too.

In contrast we know that mixed schooling has a positive effect upon community cohesion and the growth of mutual understanding, as shown by a variety of pieces of research.

Among the key findings of ‘Social Capital, Diversity and Education Policy’[[1]](#footnote-1), by Professor Irene Bruegel of the London South Bank University Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group (2006) were that “Friendship at primary schools can, and does, cross ethnic and faith divides wherever children have the opportunity to make friends from different backgrounds. At that age, in such schools, children are not highly conscious of racial differences and are largely unaware of the religion of their friends … There was some evidence that parents learned to respect people from other backgrounds as a result of their children’s experiences in mixed schools.” (p2)

‘Identities in Transition: A Longitudinal Study of Immigrant Children’[[2]](#footnote-2), by Rupert Brown, Adam Rutland & Charles Watters from the Universities of Sussex and Kent (2008) found that “… the effects of school diversity were consistent, most evidently on social relations: higher self-esteem, fewer peer problems and more cross-group friendships. Such findings show that school ethnic composition can significantly affect the promotion of positive intergroup attitudes. These findings speak against policies promoting single faith schools, since such policies are likely to lead to reduced ethnic diversity in schools.”(p9)

Meanwhile, the 2001 ‘Oldham Independent Review’[[3]](#footnote-3), which was commissioned by the Government, Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council and the local police authority after race riots in the town that year found that “Educational mixing: This is closely linked to residential, and in our view it is desirable in principle that as many schools as possible, should have mixed intake so that children growing up can learn one another’s customs and cultural backgrounds and accept that stereotypes and racism are unacceptable.” (p7)

In contrast, religious selection in faith schools has been blamed on exacerbating ethnic division. At the launch of ‘The Cantle Report into Community Cohesion in Blackburn with Darwen’ (2009) its author, Prof Ted Cantle,[[4]](#footnote-4) stated that faith schools with religious admission requirements were “automatically a source of division”[[5]](#footnote-5) in the town.

Rather than dividing children on religious grounds, the Accord Coalition and it supporters want all state funded schools to be open and suitable to all children of every background, no matter what their parents’ or their own beliefs. We want classrooms to be as diverse as the area which schools draw their pupils, as we believe mutual understanding will best grow through such a shared civic life, and because we view mutual understanding as vital to the future wellbeing and happiness of society.

For more information on the effects of policy around faith schools please see Accord’s ‘Databank of Independent Evidence on Faith Schools’[[6]](#footnote-6), which brings together and summarises high quality research from reliable sources on this issue to help provide objective facts and give focus to public debate.

**Local school admissions consultations**

While the power to determine the admission policy of voluntary controlled faith schools rests with its local authority responsible for education[[7]](#footnote-7), if the council wishes to change or formally review existing admission arrangements then it is required to follow a statutory consultation process, which is set out in pages 18 to 21 of the Schools Admissions Code. Please see <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/doc/s/schools%20admission%20code%202010.doc>.

As the code states, councils are required to consult on admission arrangements within every three years, although they can review and change admission arrangements every year if they so wish. The code also states that a consultation period must last for a minimum of eight weeks and take place between 1st November and 1st March, and that the council must consult ‘... all other admission authorities within the relevant area, the Admission Forum, admission authorities in neighbouring local authority areas, the relevant religious authority (in the case of the admission authorities of faith schools) and, for admission arrangements for entry in 2010-11 and subsequent years, relevant parents and other groups with an interest in the local area (for example, community groups)’ (p19).

The first task therefore of any campaign to change local admission policies is to find out when the local authority intends to hold its next consultation, and if one is not planned, to urge that one is undertaken.

You may be able to find out when the last consultation took place and if another is planed by merely looking at the council’s website, although if not, you should contact the council’s education department to ask for further details.

**Petitioning your council to undertake a consultation**

The Council’s constitution will set out who holds the power to determine the admission arrangements of local community and voluntary controlled faith schools.

Normally this power will rest with the council’s Executive Committee, who are sometimes otherwise often referred to as the council’s Cabinet. However, in some cases this power may be devolved to the council’s education portfolio holder – the senior councillor responsible for education. They might be known by a different title as well, such as the Executive or Cabinet member for C**hildren and Young People,** Children’s Services, S**chools and Learning, or similar.**

**Alternatively, if your council has a directly elected Mayor then** this power may instead rest with this individual and your council’s education department will be able to clarify with whom the power to determine admissions lays.

Similarly, the responsibility for choosing when to hold a consultation also ultimately rests with the elected officials and if your council does not intend to undertake a consultation soon then we advise that you petition the education portfolio holder. You should be able to find the contact details for this person on your council website.

You may wish to direct correspondence about holding a consultation to the council’s Director of Education. As with the portfolio holder for education, this person may also have a differently worded job title, and you may be able to find their contact details on your council’s website. If not you can ask your council for them, or look at the website of the Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd website (<http://www.adcs.org.uk/>), which lists the details of most Directors of Education in England. Meanwhile, the Association of Directors of Education in Wales website (<http://www.adew.org.uk/>) lists this information for Welsh councils.

We also recommend that you carbon copy in the Council Leader in your correspondence and produce below a sample letter that you could send to these individuals.

Dear Cllr Smith,

We are writing to you as a group of local residents who have come together because we are concerned that [insert name] Council is one of a decreasing minority of authorities that allow voluntary controlled faith schools under its jurisdiction to discriminate in their admission arrangements on religious grounds when they are oversubscribed.

As local residents, we believe that local schools should be inclusive and open equally to all children, regardless of their or their family’s background, and that such religious discrimination should not be permitted.

We are also concerned that, as experience in Northern Ireland, parts of Scotland and other places show, separating children on religious grounds is unwise and should also be avoided, as it can help create environments where children grow up more removed from those of different religious or philosophical beliefs and allows mistrust between groups to more readily grow.

We are aware that the local authority needs to undertake a consultation if it wants to change the admission arrangements of local schools that it acts as the admission authority for, and we are therefore keen for the authority undertake a consultation with a view to bringing the policies of voluntary controlled faith schools in the area into line with those of local community schools.

We believe that such a change would not prove controversial. Church schools were originally set up to provide education for its own sake, for pupils of all backgrounds. If the council were to ensure that local voluntary controlled faith schools (which are entirely funded by government) do not select pupils on religious grounds then it would allow these schools to return to their historic and admirable mission. It would also bring them into line with the significant majority of voluntary controlled faith schools in the country, which cannot and do not select pupils on religious grounds, and yet are still able to retain their ethos.

We would very much appreciative the opportunity to meet with you at a mutually convenient time so we can set out our concerns to you in greater detail, and would be very grateful if you or your office could contact us to try and arrange this.

So as to help set the ball rolling the following time and dates would work for us: [insert times and dates].

Yours sincerely,

[Name(s)]

[Insert local area] Inclusive Schools Campaign

Cc: Cllr Jones, Leader of Council

Cc: Dr Smith, Director of Education

**Winning over opinion**

**Growing a broad local coalition of support**

Naturally the greater the breadth and strength of support for your campaign the more successful it will be. You should look to recruit people to get involved in the campaign on an ongoing basis, and you should be able to recruit more people as the profile of the campaign increases. However, at the very beginning you need to pro-actively seek out those who are likely to share your concerns and urge them to get involved.

Who might want to get involved? Many groups and individuals are concerned about religious discrimination in schools, and the Accord Coalition unites a wide variety of member groups and supporters. Its member groups include the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), the British Humanist Association and the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. You may therefore wish to contact any local humanist group, Unitarian congregation and local ATL branch about the admissions in local voluntary controlled faith schools, noting that their national organisation already opposes religious discrimination in schools and inviting them to join and support the campaign.

There is also widespread opposition to religious selection among the teaching unions, so you could also contact any local branch of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and of the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT). You could also contact any local inter faith groups.

Just as you will be able to find support for your campaign from individuals who hold different religious or non-religious beliefs, you will also find support from individuals across the political spectrum, and you may be able to find allies on your local council from within all the political parties and groupings.

However, both the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party of England and Wales already have good national policy regarding inclusive admissions, and if these parties have a presence on your council then you may like to use their party’s respective policy as a prompt to urge their councillors to support the campaign.

The Green Party passed unambiguous policy at its autumn conference in 2009, which stated that state and private schools should not be allowed to discriminate on the basis of religion or belief in their admissions.

The Liberal Democrats meanwhile adopted their policy paper 89 ‘*Equity and Excellence: Policies to Improve 5-19 Education in English Schools and Colleges*’ at its spring conference in 2009, which stated:

*“While we acknowledge that many ‘Faith’ Schools are in practice open to all of the local community, where they are not we recognise the restriction of the rights of other parties who find they cannot get their children into a taxpayer-funded school because of a faith requirement.*

*We are also concerned that faith–based admissions (where that leads to racial and religious segregation of children) could be socially divisive, particularly in the context of the greater ethnic and religious diversity of 21st century Britain. We believe that state funded schools should not be places that reinforce existing divisions within and between communities. We recognise that many faith schools do not apply faith based admissions criteria, but are no less faith schools as a result.”* (pages 24-25)

The motion that was then subsequently passed in the conference hall also committed Lib Dem Party policy to:

*‘Allowing parents and pupils to choose schools, and not schools to choose pupils, by stopping the establishment of new schools which select by ability, aptitude or faith, and by introducing policies radically to reduce all existing forms of selection ... [as well as] Requiring all existing state-funded faith schools to come forward within five years with plans to demonstrate the inclusiveness of their intakes, with local authorities empowered to oversee and approve the delivery of these plans, and to withdraw state-funded status where inclusiveness cannot be demonstrated’*

The Liberal Democrats therefore highlight a range of problems with religious admissions and are committed to ‘radically’ reducing them. They also reaffirmed their commitment to policy paper 89 ‘*Equity and Excellence’* after the 2010 General Election at its 2010 autumn conference.

In addition to the above groups, you should also contact Accord and ask if it will formally endorse your campaign.

**Responding to the consultation**

Having got in contact with officials at your local council then you may learn in advance about when the council intends to hold its consultation, how long it will last for and how and where responses should be sent. If not however, then the council should release this information on its website and in a local newspaper.

Consultation documents vary, and you will want to provide guidance to supporters about how and where they should enter comments about inclusive pupil admissions in local schools. The consultation will probably ask a variety of other questions unrelated to religious selection in admissions, which the campaign will want to remain neutral about.

**Key arguments**

The key message of the campaign should be that it wants inclusive schools for the whole community, not privileges for some.

Common criticisms made by defenders of religious discrimination in schools are to argue that opponents of discrimination are unfairly picking on a particular religious group(s), or are in fact non-religious and infer that they are complaining because they want to undermine the role of religion in society.

Consequently Accord thinks it wise for local campaigns to reaffirm their key message of wanting inclusion for all, as well reiterate the breath of their support and show it unites those who hold a wide variety of different religious and non-religious beliefs.

The campaign may also be accused of being against faith schools. This will be not be true as the campaign will include both those who support and those who oppose faith schools in principle, and to help counter this accusation you could highlight (as mentioned in the draft letter above) how most voluntary controlled faith schools in England and Wales do not select pupils on religious grounds, yet are able to retain their ethos.

The campaign could also be accused of undermining parental choice and religious liberty. If so then in response you could emphasise that it is the campaign that is seeking to defend religious liberty by stopping religious discrimination, that religious selection is a false choice as it means other children and families lose out, and that if oversubscribed, parents do not choose a school, but schools the pupils.

Although Accord opposes all religious selection in state funded schools, the campaign may like to point out that voluntary controlled faith schools are entirely state funded and so the community has a stronger claim to determine how they operate. In contrast to voluntary controlled schools, religious organisations are supposed to meet 10% of the capital costs of voluntary aided faith schools.

**Getting your message out**

Through your local media you can reach a huge number of people. Local newspapers (both free and paid for), magazines, and radio stations, as well as regional television programmes, will be all looking for stories and pictures with a local angle.

If the campaign is prepared for when the local consultation will take place then it will be able to swing into action and try and get media coverage at the most appropriate time. A personal approach to the right journalist is usually the most effective way of getting exposure – the right journalist may be the education or political correspondent, although more than one journalist may be interested in and cover stories such as yours.

Try to talk to individual journalists and gauge their reaction. Make sure that they get key facts straight away: dates, the message you want to convey, any angle that might grab her/his interest.

You should be able to find contact details of the most appropriate journalist(s) from the media outlet’s website, or by contacting them directly. You may be surprised how straightforward it is to get coverage in your local media, especially if you have already done most the work for a journalist by setting out the key information for them.

To generate further coverage you will want to think of different angles. Perhaps you have carried out a local survey and you are publishing the results, a new group(s) and/or a high profile local individual(s) has joined the campaign, or you are organising a public debate.

Another way of getting coverage is by getting supporters to submit concise letters to the letters page of your local newspaper(s). As part of the actions you ask supporters to undertake, you should also ask that they write to their local councillors, as well (if you think it might have an effect) as the local MP(s).

It is important that if you or the campaign do happen to receive criticism that you do not over-react. It can be quite disconcerting being criticised in public and you must not take it personally. You should only respond to criticism that you think will sway people with wavering opinions should the detractor’s claims go unchallenged. Otherwise by addressing them you may risk giving arguments put forward by an opponent unwarranted credibility and then also extra publicity. The campaign will not want to allow it self to seem petty, but principled.

The campaign may also wish to organise a petition urging the council to implement inclusive admissions. The council may be able to help facilitate this; some have an online petition system that residents can use, while some may also hold a debate on the topic of a petition if enough signatures are obtained.

The campaign may wish to send out information to the local media via press releases. If you do this then make sure to include a name and contact details (phone number essential) of the person who can answer queries and provide further information. Give a back-up name and number if possible. If you do not want the information published before a certain date then mark it “EMBARGOED UNTIL…”, with a note of the date and time it can be released. You may like to mark your release as a “PRESS RELEASE” at the top, and give it a short snappy title summing up the contents. If you have background information that does not fit easily into the release, you can attach this at the end under a “NOTES FOR EDITORS” section. This is usually brief information, often in numbered points. Establishing a relationship with key local journalists is vital however, so you may like to precede or follow your email with a phone call to these people.

The campaign should take up any opportunities to be interviewed by local media. Find out who will conduct the interview and what they are planning to ask. Sometimes interviewers will do a preliminary sounding out on the phone or welcome an idea about the questions you would like to deal with – they will almost always have the same interest as you in getting your story across in a clear and interesting way. However, do not rely on interviewers necessarily sticking to their notes.

Before the interview decide on two or three main points that you want to get across and have answers ready for the most likely questions, and try to anticipate any difficult or probing ones. There is nothing wrong with admitting that you do not have all the answers, though try to work out effective ways of saying that, or of buying time to think. If you offer any personal views then make sure to distinguish them as such.

As the campaign will be a grassroots one seeking greater inclusion, make sure that newcomers are made to feel welcome and included, and that the campaign keeps the growing number of supporters up to date with news and any action that they can undertake. As it will be a grassroots campaign then it follows that it should also operate through consensus.

**Summary of key steps**

Each campaign will be different and much will depend upon your local circumstances and the particular input and contribution that activists can make. Your campaign might be smaller in scale than envisaged in this document, or it could be more ambitious and come up with lots of its own ideas. However, here is a list of key tasks we suggest that you could undertake.

1. Look at your council’s pupil admission policy to understand the extent of the religious discrimination it allows in local voluntary controlled schools. Try and find out how many schools are affected.
2. Find out from your local authority when the next consultation on school admissions is being held.
3. Try and grow a local base of support. You could contact any local humanist groups, Unitarian congregations and ATL branches – Accord could make the introduction for you, as well as local councillors. Be constantly on the look out for those who share your concerns from all quarters.
4. If an admissions consultation is not being held write to council officials to meet with them and urge that one is undertaken. Depending on the outcome, you might also urge your supporters to contact them too.
5. Be prepared in advance for the consultation if you can, and then campaign, campaign and campaign.
* Contact your local media and try and get coverage for the campaign.
* Think of imaginative ways of getting further coverage, getting your message out and encouraging as many people as possible to respond to the consultation, such as through petitions, leaflets, stunts and debates.
* Use your supporters and keep them informed and involved; ask them for ideas and urge them to take action, such as writing to the letters page of local papers and encouraging their own friends and family to respond to the consultation.
* Urge people to lobby their local councillors, as well as those councillors who will take the decision over the admission arrangements of local schools.
1. Constantly recruit. As the profile of the campaign grows, so does the opportunity to recruit more supporters, who may (if asked) be happy to take action and get further involved.
2. Await the outcome of the consultation. Should things go against you then remember that you may have another opportunity to campaign on this issue in the not too distant future, as local authorities have to consult on local admission arrangements every three years at the longest, although the new draft admission code proposes changing this to seven years. In a future campaign you should also have a pool of contacts to draw upon from the earlier one.
3. Finally, please keep Accord informed of how you get on. **Please also contact us if you have any queries or need help and advice**. Accord’s contact details can be found at the top of this document.
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3. Ritchie, D (2001) *Oldham Independent Review*. Available at <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2001/12/11/Oldhamindependentreview.pdf>. Last accessed 09/2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Available at [http://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Databank-of-Independent-Evidence-on-Faith-Schools-July-2011.pdf](http://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Databank-of-Independent-Evidence-on-Faith-Schools-July-2011.pdf.%20Last%20accessed%2008/2011). Last accessed 09/2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/4351852.Cantle_report__Blackburn_a_divided_town/>. Last accessed 10/2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Available at <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/faith-schools-databank/>. Last accessed 31/10/11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Some areas in England have two tiered local government, and have both a County and District Council; some areas can also have three tiers if they also have their own civil parish council. However, in all cases the County Council is the local authority responsible for education. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)