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Faith Schools in England: FAQs

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Summary

The Library regularly receives enquiries from Members relating to faith schools, and the particular arrangements in place relating to them. This note provides answers to some of the most common questions raised, and also some relevant statistical information. It is not intended to be a definitive guide to faith schools, but rather to provide answers to those frequently raised issues. It deals with faith schools in the state-funded sector.

This note relates to England only.

1. Introduction: what is a faith school?

The Government funds many different types of 'faith school' – i.e. schools which are designated as having a faith character. Currently, around one third of state-funded schools in England have a faith designation. Faith schools can either be maintained by the local authority, or operate outside of local authority control (in the case of academies and free schools).

The vast majority of faith schools in England have a Christian faith designation, but there are also a small number of schools with other faith designations – including Muslim, Jewish and Sikh. Schools with a faith designation are able to use faith criteria in their oversubscription criteria, but they must (with the exception of grammar schools) offer a place to any child, where a place is available. Dependent on school type, having a faith designation may impact also on staffing policy, what is included in the Religious Education curriculum, and the ownership of the school buildings.

The gov.uk website provides the following brief [summary](#) of the position of state-funded faith schools:

Faith schools have to follow the national curriculum, but they can choose what they teach in religious studies.

Faith schools may have different admissions criteria and staffing policies to state schools, although anyone can apply for a place.

Faith academies do not have to teach the national curriculum and have their own admissions processes.

2. Frequently Asked Questions

2.1 Can faith schools use faith-based criteria in their admissions policies?

It is unlawful for maintained and independent schools to discriminate against a child on the grounds of the child's religion or belief in school admissions. However, faith schools are exempt and are permitted to use faith-based oversubscription criteria in order to give higher priority in admissions to children who are members of, or who practise, their faith or denomination. This only applies if a school is oversubscribed.

The [School Admissions Code](#) provides information on the rules in this area. The Code states that:

[*The Equality Act 2010*] contains limited exceptions to the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion or belief and sex. Schools designated by the Secretary of State as having a religious character (faith schools) are exempt from some aspects of the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief and this means they can make a decision about whether or not to admit a child as a pupil on the basis of religion or belief. Single-sex schools are lawfully permitted to discriminate on the grounds of sex in their admission arrangements.¹

The Code further states that, when allocating places:

2.8 With the exception of designated grammar schools, all maintained schools, including faith schools, that have enough places available **must** offer a place to every child who has applied for one, without condition or the use of any oversubscription criteria.

2.9 Admission authorities **must not** refuse to admit a child solely because:

- a) they have applied later than other applicants;
- b) they are not of the faith of the school in the case of a faith school;
- c) they followed a different curriculum at their previous school;
- d) information has not been received from their previous school;
- or
- e) they have missed entrance tests for selective places.²

However, where places are oversubscribed, a faith school may use faith-based criteria for deciding which pupils are admitted. The Code sets out the following:

1.36 As with other maintained schools, these schools are required to offer every child who applies, whether of the faith, another faith or no faith, a place at the school if there are places available. Schools designated by the Secretary of State as having a religious character (commonly known as faith schools) may use faith-based oversubscription criteria and allocate places by reference to faith where the school is oversubscribed.

¹ Department for Education, [Schools Admissions Code](#), December 2014, p34

² Ibid., p22

1.37 Admission authorities must ensure that parents can easily understand how any faith-based criteria will be reasonably satisfied. Admission authorities for schools designated with a religious character may give priority to all looked after children and previously looked after children whether or not of the faith, but they must give priority to looked after children and previously looked after children of the faith before other children of the faith. Where any element of priority is given in relation to children not of the faith they must give priority to looked after children and previously looked after children not of the faith above other children not of the faith.

1.38 Admission authorities for schools designated as having a religious character must have regard to any guidance from the body or person representing the religion or religious denomination when constructing faith based admission arrangements, to the extent that the guidance complies with the mandatory provisions and guidelines of this Code. They must also consult with the body or person representing the religion or religious denomination when deciding how membership or practice of the faith is to be demonstrated. Church of England schools must, as required by the Diocesan Boards of Education Measure 1991, consult with their diocese about proposed admission arrangements before any public consultation.³

New academies and free schools: the 50% limit and abandoned proposals to repeal

Funding agreements for entirely new Academies⁴ and Free Schools with a religious character provide that where the school is oversubscribed at least 50% of places are to be allocated without reference to faith.

In September 2016, the Government published the consultation [Schools that work for everyone](#), which included proposals to allowing new faith free schools to select up to 100% of pupils based on their faith, subject to schools taking new measures to promote inclusivity.

The [Government response to the consultation](#) was published in May 2018, and stated that the Government had decided to retain the 50% cap. However, the response announced a capital scheme to support the creation of new voluntary aided schools.⁵ Faith voluntary aided schools may have 100% faith-based oversubscription criteria in their admissions.⁶

2.2 What can faith schools teach in Religious Education?

Local authority maintained secondary schools

Religious Education (RE) is compulsory for all pupils in local authority maintained schools aged 5 to 16 years unless they are withdrawn from these lessons by their parents. They are not obliged to give a reason,

³ Ibid., p16

⁴ i.e. not converters from the maintained or independent sectors, or those sponsored Academies with a predecessor school

⁵ See also Department for Education, [Drive to create more good school places for families](#), 11 May 2018

⁶ Revised guidance from the DfE on [Establishing a new school: free school presumption](#) was published in May 2018 to accommodate this announcement.

and the school is expected to comply with the request. The statutory provisions relating to religious education are contained in sections 69 and 71 and schedule 19 of the *School Standards and Framework Act 1998*, as amended.

RE in schools without a religious character must follow the agreed syllabus for the area. The agreed syllabus is drawn up by the local education authority (LEA), taking advice from local bodies. All locally agreed syllabuses must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Britain are mainly Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions.

RE in a school with a religious character must be provided in accordance with the school's trust deed or, where provision is not made by a trust deed, in accordance with the beliefs of the religion or denomination specified in the order that designates the school as having a religious character. RE in a foundation or voluntary controlled school with a religious character must be provided in accordance with the locally agreed syllabus for the area. However, where parents request it, provision may be made in accordance with the schools trust deed or, where provision is not made by trust deed, in accordance with the beliefs of the religion or denomination specified in the order.

Academies and Free Schools

Requirements for academies broadly reflect the provisions that apply to local authorities and schools in the maintained sector. The requirements including the type of RE that an academy provides will be set out in the funding agreement between the individual academy trust and the Secretary of State.

Further information

Broader information on RE is provided in the Library briefing, [Religious Education in schools](#), CBP 07167.

2.3 Can faith schools use faith as a criteria when hiring staff?

Under the *Equality Act 2010* (EA 2010), faith schools are permitted to take into account religious considerations in employment matters relating to head-teachers and teachers, in accordance with the [School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#).

EA 2010, Schedule 22, para 4, provides that a person (including a school, under the relevant definitions) does not contravene the Act only by doing something that it is required to do for the purposes of:

- (a) section 58(6) or (7) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (dismissal of teachers because of failure to give religious education efficiently);
- (b) section 60(4) and (5) of that Act (religious considerations relating to certain appointments);
- (c) section 124A of that Act (preference for certain teachers at independent schools of a religious character).

Those provisions give independent and voluntary schools a broad discretion to make appointments on the basis of religious belief. For example, in relation to independent faith schools, section 124A of the 1998 Act provides that:

- (2) Preference may be given, in connection with the appointment, promotion or remuneration of teachers at the school, to persons—
- (a) whose religious opinions are in accordance with the tenets of the religion or the religious denomination specified in relation to the school under section 124B(2), or
 - (b) who attend religious worship in accordance with those tenets, or
 - (c) who give, or are willing to give, religious education at the school in accordance with those tenets.
- (3) Regard may be had, in connection with the termination of the employment or engagement of any teacher at the school, to any conduct on his part which is incompatible with the precepts, or with the upholding of the tenets, of the religion or religious denomination so specified.

Department for Education [Staffing and employment advice for schools](#) provides a more detailed explanation of the position in relation to maintained schools with a faith designation:

6.1 The governing body in a voluntary-aided school may give preference with regard to the appointment, remuneration and promotion of teachers at the school, to persons:

- whose religious opinions are in accordance with the tenets of the school's religion;
- who attend religious worship in accordance with those tenets; or
- who give, or are willing to give, religious education at the school in accordance with those tenets.

6.2 The governing body may also have regard, in connection with the termination of the employment of a teacher at the school, to any conduct by the teacher which is incompatible with the precepts of, or with the upholding of the tenets of the school's religion.

6.3 Where the number of teachers at a foundation or voluntary-controlled school with a religious character is more than two, the teachers must include persons who are selected for their fitness and competence to teach religious education in accordance with the school's trust deed or with the tenets of the school's religion and are specifically appointed to do so. These are known as 'reserved teachers'. The number of reserved teachers must not exceed one fifth of the total number of teachers including the head teacher. The head teacher can be selected on these grounds but must count towards the one fifth quota.

6.4 When appointing a head teacher who is not to be a reserved teacher, the governing bodies of foundation and voluntary-controlled schools with a religious character may have regard to that person's ability and fitness to preserve and develop the religious character of the school. [...]

6.7 In voluntary-aided schools with a religious character, employers may 'discriminate' on religious grounds where being of a particular religion or religious denomination is a genuine occupational requirement (GOR). However, it should not be assumed that a blanket approach to GOR can be applied to all support staff⁷. The governing body will be under a responsibility to be able to demonstrate that it is reasonable and proportionate to require an employee to be of a particular religion or belief for the job in question.⁷

The DfE's [Governance Handbook](#) outlines the position in respect of academies:

In relation to academies, academy converters follow the position of the school prior to conversion. New academies with a religious character are able to appoint all their teaching staff based on faith in line with their designation, and can appoint support staff by application of religious criteria, where they can demonstrate a genuine occupational requirement for doing so.⁸

2.4 Do particular rules apply in the inspection of faith schools?

In faith academies, foundation or voluntary faith schools, Ofsted inspectors must not comment on the content of religious worship or on denominational religious education (RE), although they may attend and comment on the contribution of those lessons to the school's wider aims, such as pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Particular provision for the inspection of RE and collective worship in these schools is provided for in [section 48 of the Education Act 2005](#). Ofsted's [School Inspection Handbook](#) provides information on the appointment of these inspectors:

34. In most [schools with a religious character], denominational education and collective worship are inspected by a body appointed by the maintained school's governing body under section 48 of the Education Act 2005 or as provided in the academy's funding agreement. In a voluntary controlled school designated as having a religious character, we [Ofsted] inspect RE, but not collective worship.

35. Inspectors may, however, gather evidence from anywhere relevant (including RE lessons and assemblies) to evaluate pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural education, personal development and/or behaviour and attitudes. The fact that the school has been designated as having a religious character must be referenced in the 'information about this school' section of the inspection report.

36. Section 48 inspections (or the equivalent inspection of an academy) are carried out every three to five years (and usually within two to three years of a new voluntary-aided school or academy/free school opening).⁹

⁷ Department for Education, [Staffing and employment advice for schools](#), October 2018, p27-28

⁸ Department for Education, [Governance Handbook](#), March 2019, p76

⁹ Ofsted, [School Inspection Handbook](#), November 2019, p10-11

For example, all Church of England dioceses and the Methodist Church use the National Society's framework for the [Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools](#) (SIAMS) for section 48 inspections.

2.5 Can schools become faith schools when converting to academy status?

Schools cannot acquire or remove a faith character as part of the academy conversion process. The Government's information on [conversion relating to faith schools](#) notes:

If your school has a religious character, you will also need to get approval from your religious body (for example, the local diocese for a church school) before you can apply [to become an academy].

You will need to send us a copy of their approval later in the conversion process.

2.6 Can faith schools teach creationism?

The following response to a Parliamentary Question from 2014 sets out the established position relating to the teaching of creationism:

Mr Godsiff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what penalties would be incurred by a free school, academy or other educational establishment which was found to be teaching or otherwise supporting creationism. [202221]

Mr Timpson: State-funded schools, including free schools and academies, should not teach creationism as an evidence-based scientific theory. Outside of science lessons, it is permissible for schools to cover creationism as part of religious education lessons, providing that this does not undermine the teaching of established scientific theory. Academies and free schools are required to teach a broad and balanced curriculum and the model funding agreement now prohibits the teaching of creationism as an evidence-based theory. Independent schools must comply with the independent school standards, and are subject to inspections by Ofsted or an alternative inspectorate.

All state-funded schools are subject to Ofsted inspections and a range of intervention powers are in place if required. In addition, any breach of academy or free school funding agreements in relation to creationism would be swiftly dealt with by the Department for Education and could result in the termination of the funding agreement.¹⁰

2.7 Do children attending faith schools have particular rights relating to school transport?

Concerns are often raised about the impact of the rules relating to free school transport on children who attend faith schools. Many of these rules provide rights to transport to the nearest 'suitable school' for a child, which is defined as:

¹⁰ [HC Deb 30 Jun 2014 c351W](#)

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the nearest qualifying school with places available that provides education appropriate to the age, ability and aptitude of the child, and any SEN [Special Educational Needs] that the child may have.¹¹

However, parents who would like to send their child to a faith school may do so in preference to another 'suitable school' which is closer, and find their rights to free school transport affected.

Statutory [Home to school travel and transport guidance](#) is in place, setting out the duties of local authorities to provide free school transport. It states that local authorities must:

provide free transport for all pupils of compulsory school age (5-16) if their nearest suitable school is:

- beyond 2 miles (if below the age of 8); or
- beyond 3 miles (if aged between 8 and 16)¹²

'Extended rights' eligibility also requires local authorities to:

provide free transport where pupils are entitled to free school meals or their parents are in receipt of maximum Working Tax Credit if:

- the nearest suitable school is beyond 2 miles (for children over the age of 8 and under 11);
- the school is between 2 and 6 miles (if aged 11-16 and there are not three or more suitable nearer schools);
- the school is between 2 and 15 miles and is the nearest school preferred on the grounds of religion or belief (aged 11-16).¹³

Some additional duties are in place, for instance for children with special educational needs, and in relation to children whose journey to school might take them along unsafe routes.

Beyond these requirements, local authority provision of school transport is discretionary. The guidance sets out in detail how local authorities should approach transport to faith schools and the consideration that should be given to relevant issues, such as equality:

38. Many parents will choose to send their children to a school as near as possible to their home. However, some parents choose to send their children to a school with a particular ethos because they adhere to a particular faith, or belief. Local authorities need to respect parents' religious and philosophical convictions as to the education to be provided for their children, give careful consideration to discrimination issues and seek legal opinion if they are unsure about the effect of their policies, before publishing them each year.

¹¹ Department for Education, [Home to school travel and transport guidance](#), July 2014, p24

¹² Department for Education, [Home to school travel and transport guidance](#), July 2014, p9

¹³ Ibid., p10

39. Under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), parents do not enjoy a specific right to have their children educated at a school with a religious character or a secular school, or to have transport arrangements made by their local authority to and from any such school and the Equality Act 2010 (which places a duty on local authorities not to discriminate against a person on the grounds of their religion or belief), does not apply to the exercise of an authority's functions in relation to transport.

40. However, the Secretary of State continues to attach importance to the opportunity that many parents have to choose a school or college in accordance with their religious or philosophical beliefs, and believes that wherever possible, local authorities should ensure that transport arrangements support the religious or philosophical preference parents express. In many cases these schools may be more distant and therefore the provision of transport and/or training, and the avoidance of unreasonable expenditure on travel are encouraged. However, the department appreciates that this may be incompatible, for example, on grounds of excessive journey length, or where the journey may have a detrimental impact on the child's education.

41. The Act places a duty on local authorities to make arrangements for secondary pupils from low income backgrounds to attend the nearest school preferred on grounds of "religion or belief", where that school is between 2 and 15 miles from their home. Local authorities may wish to use their discretionary powers to extend transport arrangements beyond the extended rights duty and facilitate attendance at such schools. The Secretary of State expects local authorities to consider all possible options before they disturb well established arrangements, some of which have been associated with local agreements or understandings about the siting of such schools. Local authorities should pay particularly careful attention to the potential impact of any changes on low income families (those not eligible under extended rights) whose parents adhere to a particular faith or philosophy, and who have expressed a preference for a particular school because of their religious or philosophical beliefs.

42. Local authorities will need to be aware of their obligation not to discriminate under article 14 of ECHR. For example, where local authorities use their discretionary powers to make travel arrangements for children on the basis of their parents' religious beliefs to schools designated with a religious character, the equalities implications should be considered, to facilitate parents' who wish their children to be educated in accordance with their philosophical convictions.¹⁴

In a Westminster Hall [debate](#) on school transport in June 2015, the Schools Minister Nick Gibb expanded on the Government position:

We believe that [local authorities] are best placed to determine how resources should be used in the areas that they serve and to balance the demands of a broad range of discretionary travel against their budget priorities. If we were to remove this discretion from local authorities' responsibilities, it would hugely increase the number of eligible children at a substantial cost to the taxpayer. Therefore, it is much more practical and helpful to allow local authorities to continue to make these important

¹⁴ Ibid., p15-16

decisions locally, but they still need to make the right decisions locally.¹⁵

2.8 How can new faith schools be opened?

Free schools

There is a [presumption in law](#) that new schools will be free schools, which operate as academies.¹⁶

A [free school application guide](#) has been published by the DfE. There are 'waves' of applications rather than a continuously open process, although local authorities may also run competitions for new free schools, where they believe there is demand for new school places in their area.

Separate guidance is in place for the process to [establish special free schools](#).

Waves of applications may have particular requirements. The DfE guidance notes that in the most recent case:

Wave 14 was targeted at areas of low standards with basic need for a high proportion of the additional school places that the free school will create. In addition, we are looking to extend the free schools programme to areas that have not previously benefitted.

A faith free school may be established by the usual process. However, there are additional requirements on schools that want to establish themselves legally as having a religious character. Annex C of the [guidance](#) provides an overview.

Faith schools: Voluntary aided schools (VA)

It is possible to open new voluntary aided schools, a type of maintained school which are often but not always faith schools (predominantly Roman Catholic). In VA schools, a charitable organisation such as the Church contributes to building costs and is involved in the running of the school. Guidance on [opening maintained schools](#) provides advice on the relevant process (see page 9 on 'section 11 proposals' and page 21 on the statutory process involved).

The local authority would decide on applications for new VA schools. Capital funding, and necessary building work, would where necessary be done by agreement with the DfE, where the proposers are not providing this type of funding themselves. Details of the trusts on which the school site is to be held would be provided as part of the application.

Any person can propose to open a school in this way. Evidence of any relevant experience in education held by the proposers including details of any involvement in the improvement of standards in education, will be provided as part of the application.

There was previously a [capital scheme](#) to help establish voluntary aided schools, but this is currently closed.

¹⁵ [HC Deb 25 Jun 2015 c371-372WH](#)

¹⁶ [Section 6A, Education and Inspections Act 2006](#)

2.9 Do faith schools have to teach Relationships and Sex Education?

The *Children and Social Work Act 2017* requires:

- All primary schools in England to teach age-appropriate 'relationships education'; and
- All secondary schools in England to teach age-appropriate 'relationships and sex education'

These changes apply to all schools in England – local authority maintained, academies and independent – from September 2020. However, [statutory guidance](#) has already been published and schools are encouraged to teach the new requirements.

Faith schools are required to teach the new subjects. However, the guidance states that all schools should take the religious background of their pupils into account when planning teaching, but notes that faith schools may use their faith to inform what is taught:

21. All schools may teach about faith perspectives. In particular, schools with a religious character may teach the distinctive faith perspective on relationships, and balanced debate may take place about issues that are seen as contentious. For example, the school may wish to reflect on faith teachings about certain topics as well as how their faith institutions may support people in matters of relationships and sex.¹⁷

The Library briefing [Relationships and Sex Education in Schools \(England\)](#), CBP 6103, provides more detailed information, including on what will be taught at different ages.

2.10 What do faith schools have to teach about same sex marriage?

During the passage of the then *Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill* there was considerable debate about the implications of the legislation for teachers in schools. The then Equalities Minister, Maria Miller, made a statement in December 2012 on this issue:

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend reassure us that whatever is announced tomorrow, no teacher will face prosecution or civil action as a result of espousing a Christian view of marriage?

Maria Miller: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue, which has been a concern for many of our constituents. I can confirm that nothing will change what children are taught. Teachers will be able to describe their belief that marriage is between a man and a woman, while acknowledging that same-sex marriage will be available. It is important to reassure people. There is a great deal of what perhaps one could call scaremongering. It is important that teachers and faith schools are aware that they will continue to enjoy the same situation as they do now.¹⁸

¹⁷ Department for Education, [Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education \(RSE\) and Health Education: statutory guidance](#), June 2019, p12-13

¹⁸ [HC Deb 10 December 2012, c 31](#)

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission has published a guidance document, [The Marriage \(Same Sex Couples\) Act 2013: The Equality and Human Rights Implications for the Provision of School Education](#). This was updated in June 2014, and states that schools are not required to *promote* same-sex marriage:

Teaching about marriage must be done in a sensitive, reasonable, respectful and balanced way. Teachers are subject to professional requirements, the school curriculum, school policies, and anti-discrimination duties towards colleagues and pupils.

No school, or individual teacher, is under a duty to support, promote or endorse marriage of same sex couples. Teaching should be based on facts and should enable pupils to develop an understanding of how the law applies to different relationships. Teachers must have regard to statutory guidance on sex and relationship education, and to meet duties under equality and human rights law.

Subject to the above, nothing in the Act affects the rights of schools with a religious character to continue to teach about marriage according to their religious doctrines or ethos. Any views expressed about marriage of same sex couples, by governors, teachers, other school staff, parents and pupils, may reflect the religious ethos of the school.

Governors, teachers and non-teaching staff in schools, parents and pupils, are free to hold their own religious or philosophical beliefs about marriage of same sex couples. These rights are not limited by anything in the Act, education law, or equality and human rights law.

Pre-existing parental opt-out rights in respect of sex and relationship education remain unaffected by the Act.¹⁹

A [written Parliamentary Question](#) answered by the schools Minister, Lord Nash, who continues as Minister under the Conservative administration, in November 2014 provides the then Government's position:

[...] The Regulations require that schools actively promote principles which encourage respect for other people, paying particular regard to the protected characteristics. This is a crucial distinction. It is right to respect other people, even if one does not agree with them or their way of life. This is a fundamental part of preparation for life in modern Britain.

The Government is absolutely clear that the changes make no difference to the existing legal obligations that schools have under the Equality Act 2010. All schools are already required to abide by the Act and their obligations are not altered by the changes to the standards. The changes do not fetter the views of individual teachers or censor the discussion of relevant matters. A teacher who, for instance, disagrees with same-sex marriage because of their Christian faith will not be prevented from expressing that view by these changes. Since the changes make no difference to schools' existing legal obligations under the Equality Act there is no question of the ability of schools to teach traditional Christian values being overridden.²⁰

¹⁹ EHRC, [The Marriage \(Same Sex Couples\) Act 2013: The Equality and Human Rights Implications for the Provision of School Education](#), Pg 2-3

²⁰ [PQ HL2440 \[Church schools\], 5 November 2014](#)

Some concerns have been raised about the teaching of same sex marriage in schools. See section 3 of the Library briefing on [Sex and Relationship Education in Schools](#), CBP 06103, for more information.

3. Statistics

3.1 Number of faith schools

In January 2019, there were 6,802 state funded faith schools in England (around 34% of all state-funded mainstream schools).²¹ The number of state funded faith schools in England broken down by phase and religion is shown in the table at the end of this section.

The majority were primary schools; 6,179 or around 37% of state funded mainstream primaries.²² The 623 secondary²³ faith schools made up only 18% of all state funded mainstream secondaries. The proportion of state funded faith schools has increased gradually over time (from 35% of primaries and 16% of secondaries in January 2000).

Church of England schools were the most common type among primary schools (26% of all primaries); Roman Catholic schools the most common at secondary level (9%). Non-Christian faith schools remained very much in the minority (when combined they made up less than 1% of all state-funded mainstream schools).

While the number of Christian schools has fallen slightly since 2007 the number of non-Christian faith schools has increased. Between January 2007 and September 2017 the number of Jewish schools increased by 12, Muslim schools by 24, Sikh schools by 10, and all 7 of the Hindu schools have opened during this period.²⁴

There have been Jewish state schools since the establishment of the 'modern' primary and secondary systems in the first half of the 20th century. The first Muslim state school was established in 1997 and opened in 1998, the first Sikh school opened in 1999 and the first Hindu school opened in 2008.²⁵

Region and local authority

At the primary level, the North West and South West regions had the highest proportion of pupils attending faith schools in 2019 (42% and 35% respectively). London and East of England had the lowest at 21% and 22% respectively.

At secondary level the North West (31%) and the North East (24%) had the highest proportion of pupils attending faith schools and the East of England (12%) and the South West (12%) had the lowest.²⁶

The range of the proportion of pupils attending faith schools at a local authority level is wider, ranging from 8% in North East Lincolnshire to 53% in Wigan.²⁷

²¹ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#): January 2019, DfE (Main Tables, Table 2a)

²² *ibid.*

²³ Includes all through schools.

²⁴ Edubase, DfE

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#): January 2019, DfE (Underlying data)

²⁷ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#): January 2019, DfE (Main Tables, Table 2a)

LAs with the highest % of pupils at faith schools		LAs with the lowest % of pupils at faith schools	
England, state-funded mainstream schools		England, state-funded mainstream schools	
Local Authority	% of pupils at faith schools	Local Authority	% of pupils at faith schools
Wigan	53%	North East Lincolnshire	8%
Westminster	53%	Thurrock	9%
Blackburn with Darwen	52%	Newham	10%
Knowsley	50%	Cornwall	11%
Liverpool	50%	Milton Keynes	11%
Kensington and Chelsea	49%	Luton	11%
Bolton	47%	Medway	12%
Lancashire	46%	Rotherham	12%
Sefton	44%	Derby	12%
St. Helens	44%	Sheffield	12%

Source:

[Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#): January 2019, DfE (Underlying data)

Pupils

In January 2019, around 1.9 million pupils were taught in state-funded faith schools (28% of primary and 18% of secondary pupils).²⁸ The number of pupils attending state funded faith schools in England broken down by phase and religion is shown in the table at the end of this section.

The current primary rate is the same as in 2000. The rate at secondary level is higher than in 2000 (15%).^{29 30}

In January 2019, 13% of pupils at state-funded primary faith schools were eligible for free school meals compared to 17% at non-faith primaries. Rates at faith secondary schools were also slightly below those in non-faith secondaries (13% compared to 14%).³¹

30% of pupils at faith primary schools had an ethnic background other than white British,³² this was below the non-faith primary average (36%). However, there were higher rates of non-white British pupils in faith secondary schools than the non-faith secondary average (39% compared to 32%).³³

²⁸ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#): January 2019, DfE (Main Tables, Table 2a)

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *Schools in England 2000*, DfE

³¹ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#): January 2019, DfE (Underlying data)

³² Pupils of compulsory school age and above excluding those with no classified ethnic background.

³³ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#): January 2019, DfE (Underlying data)

3.2 Secondary school performance

The GCSE attainment measures examined below show that results for faith schools are better, on average, than those for non-faith schools. Please note there are many other possible measures of school performance, which may provide different findings.

In 2018 the average Attainment 8 score in mainstream state-funded faith schools was 49.6 compared to 47.0 at non-faith schools. In addition, the average proportion of faith school pupils achieving grades 9-5 in English and Maths GCSE was 48% compared to 44% at non-faith schools.^{34 35}

However, pupil intake differs between faith and non-faith schools, both in terms of background characteristics (such as free school meal eligibility which was discussed in the previous section) and prior attainment. Pupils at faith schools were less likely to have low prior attainment when starting secondary school and more likely to have high prior attainment. This means that headline results may not give us the most meaningful comparisons.

It is not possible to control for all pupil intake characteristics; but the table below shows that the attainment gap between faith and non-faith schools narrows once GCSE attainment is broken down by prior attainment band.

Faith schools' GCSE results are better on average than non-faith schools			
Mainstream schools in England, 2019			
	Faith	Non-faith	All
<i>Average Attainment 8 score</i>			
Low prior attainment	26.5	25.2	25.4
Medium prior attainment	42.4	40.7	41.0
High prior attainment	62.5	60.9	61.2
All	49.6	47.0	47.4
<i>% achieving a 9-5 pass in English and maths</i>			
Low prior attainment	3%	3%	3%
Medium prior attainment	27%	24%	25%
High prior attainment	79%	77%	78%
All	48%	44%	44%

Source:

[Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2018](#), DfE (National Tables, 2c & 4c)

³⁴ [Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2018](#), DfE (National Tables, Table 2c and Table 4c)

³⁵ The DfE [publishes](#) Progress 8 scores for faith schools of each religion. The Progress 8 score of each type of faith school exceeds that of non-faith schools. However, an average Progress 8 score for faith schools is not available.

Faith school pupil intakes are more likely to have higher prior attainment

Mainstream schools in England, 2019

Attainment Band	Faith	Non-faith	All
Low	11.2	13.0	12.7
Medium	43.9	44.8	44.7
High	44.9	42.1	42.6

Source:

[Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2018](#), DfE (National Tables, Table 2c and Table 4c)

Religious character of schools

State-funded mainstream schools in England January 2019

	Primary				Secondary				Total			
	Schools		Pupils		Schools		Pupils		Schools		Pupils	
	number	%	thousands	%	number	%	thousands	%	number	%	thousands	%
No religious character	10,590	63.2%	3,385	71.6%	2,825	81.9%	2,727	82.0%	13,415	66.4%	6,113	75.9%
Church of England	4,370	26.1%	870	18.4%	209	6.1%	200	6.0%	4,579	22.6%	1,070	13.3%
Roman Catholic	1,649	9.8%	429	9.1%	317	9.2%	316	9.5%	1,966	9.7%	746	9.3%
Methodist	25	0.1%	4	0.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	25	0.1%	4	0.1%
Other Christian	72	0.4%	17	0.4%	58	1.7%	61	1.8%	130	0.6%	78	1.0%
Jewish	36	0.2%	11	0.2%	13	0.4%	9	0.3%	49	0.2%	21	0.3%
Muslim	14	0.1%	6	0.1%	17	0.5%	8	0.3%	31	0.2%	14	0.2%
Sikh	6	0.0%	2	0.0%	6	0.2%	4	0.1%	12	0.1%	6	0.1%
Hindu	5	0.0%	2	0.0%	2	0.1%	1	0.0%	7	0.0%	3	0.0%
Multi-faith	2	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.0%	1	0.0%	3	0.0%	1	0.0%
Total	16,769	100.0%	4,727	100.0%	3,448	100.0%	3,328	100.0%	20,217	100.0%	8,055	100.0%
<i>Faith schools</i>	<i>6,179</i>	<i>36.8%</i>	<i>1,342</i>	<i>28.4%</i>	<i>623</i>	<i>18.1%</i>	<i>601</i>	<i>18.0%</i>	<i>6,802</i>	<i>33.6%</i>	<i>1,942</i>	<i>24.1%</i>

Notes: Primary and secondary totals include middle schools as deemed. Secondary includes all through schools.

Source: [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2019 \(Table 2a\)](#)

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