

# Independent faith schools

Is the standard relating to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils, together with the five regulations underpinning it, fit for purpose?

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The survey was conducted at the request of the Secretary of State to establish the fitness for purpose of the standard and five regulations that registered independent faith schools are required to meet, and their contribution to preparing children and young people for life in Britain. In the 51 schools visited, there was no conflict between their aims and the regulations. The regulations enable schools to prepare their pupils appropriately, although clarification of the language is required in some instances.

**Age group:** 4-19

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**Published:** October 2009

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**Reference no:** 090093

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## Executive summary

The survey was conducted at the request of the Secretary of State to determine the fitness for purpose of the standard for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and the five regulations which independent faith schools, registered by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), must meet.<sup>1</sup> The survey evaluated the relevance of the regulations in relation to preparing children and young people for life in modern Britain.

Inspectors visited 51 registered independent primary and secondary faith schools for children from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu religions, including two residential schools. Additional evidence was gained from members of organisations representing Christian, Jewish and Muslim schools who attended two focus groups conducted as part of the survey.

The provision made by all the schools visited to develop their pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding was at least good. There were many examples of pupils demonstrating an excellent understanding of spiritual and moral attributes. In all the schools visited, the pupils gained a strong sense of identity and of belonging to their faith, their school and to Britain. In all cases, the survey found that the regulations for this area of schools' work were compatible with the schools' desire to promote their pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and to live successfully in modern Britain. However, the view of many of the leaders of the schools visited and representatives at the focus groups was that greater clarity was needed in defining what the regulations required. In particular, concern was expressed about the cultural dimension of the regulations. The view was expressed frequently that there should be greater emphasis on the values associated with being a good citizen. Good citizenship was considered by all the schools visited to be the duty of a good believer because this honoured the faith.

Pupils' understanding of other cultures increased as they moved through the school. All the schools visited demonstrated the importance of respecting people of a different faith. Although most schools taught a general understanding of other faiths, particularly to older pupils, many of the schools visited were reluctant to teach about other faiths in great detail.

Several of the schools visited showed great determination to build links within their neighbourhood, including with local schools. However, they were often hampered by a lack of resources, and limited professional support networks locally, that might promote cohesion between faith schools and secular schools. Where such links had been established, the schools said that staff as well as pupils benefited.

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<sup>1</sup> These are set out in detail in paragraph 1 below.

For many pupils, the success of their independent faith school in developing them as confident young people was confirmed by their positive transition to a secular secondary school and they were able to participate fully in the wider world. Nevertheless, a number of parents found that their children had had to compromise aspects of their religious practices because, for example, they could no longer pray during the day or could no longer adhere to their religious dress code.

## Key findings

- Overall, the standard for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and the five regulations underpinning the standard are fit for purpose. However, there is a lack of clarity in the language of the regulations.
- Of the five regulations, 'respect for their own and other cultures' (regulation 2e) caused most concern. All the schools emphasised the need for their pupils to respect other people and recognise their freedom of worship, but it was strongly felt that this should remain distinct from any requirement to teach about other faiths in detail.
- In all the schools visited, the pupils gained a strong sense of personal worth and of belonging to their faith community. This was nurtured through their school's ethos, the taught curriculum and in regular individual and communal prayers and thanksgiving.
- All the schools visited taught explicitly that good citizenship was a requirement of a good believer. As a result, pupils felt they belonged, as British citizens, to this country. There was some dissatisfaction, however, with the phrase 'preparation for modern Britain'.
- The majority of the schools visited used good quality displays and teaching materials which were free from prejudice in relation to teaching citizenship and teaching about other faiths. However, in a small number of the schools, some of the published teaching materials included biased material or provided inaccurate information about other religions.
- For the majority of the schools visited, the faith community was distinct and different from their local community. Many of the schools enjoyed links with neighbouring institutions of different faiths but they were clear that maintaining the distinctiveness of their faith was the primary reason for their existence. Each faith tradition had a range of views about the extent to which pupils should participate in the wider secular community and their understanding about 'community life' (regulation 2c) was different. Nevertheless, almost all the schools visited recognised the importance of encouraging a sense of belonging to the local area, to promote community cohesion.
- Eleven of the headteachers said they would welcome access to the expertise in local authorities and other external agencies to provide training for their staff in various aspects of the curriculum. However, only four of the schools had strong and effective links with local authority children's services. They showed how networks with fellow professionals could improve mutual understanding and contribute to community cohesion.

- Many pupils left faith schools to complete their secondary education in the state sector, often for financial reasons. Although many parents reported no concerns about this transition, a minority felt their children had to compromise on key aspects of their belief. For example, pupils received little support for continuing their prayer life or adhering to their religious dress code.

## Recommendations

To improve further the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils in registered faith schools, the DCSF, in discussion with stakeholders should:

- define clearly the meaning of each of the five strands of the regulations
- clarify specifically the term 'contribution to community life' in regulation 2c
- agree on what constitutes 'broad general knowledge' in regulation 2d
- define clearly what is meant by culture in relation to faith in regulation 2e.

The DCSF should:

- encourage independent faith schools to work with other schools in their continuing professional development activities
- encourage independent faith schools to contribute to building local understanding between faith groups and other communities
- provide guidance to local authorities to improve local partnerships between maintained schools and independent faith schools.

Independent faith schools should:

- ensure that all resources used to teach about other faiths are accurate and unbiased.

## Background to the survey

### The regulations

1. Independent schools, including independent faith schools, are required to meet the following regulations:

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils at the school meets the standard if the school promotes principles which -

- (2a) enable pupils to develop their self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-confidence;
- (2b) enable pupils to distinguish right from wrong and to respect the law;
- (2c) encourage pupils to accept responsibility for their behaviour, show initiative and understand how they can contribute to community life;
- (2d) provide pupils with a broad general knowledge of public institutions and services in England; and
- (2e) assist pupils to acquire an appreciation of and respect for their own and other cultures in a way that promotes tolerance and harmony between different cultural traditions.<sup>2</sup>

2. The survey was conducted at the request of the Secretary of State to determine the fitness for purpose of the standard for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and the five regulations set out above.

### Survey methodology

3. Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 51 registered, independent faith schools drawn from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu religions. Of these, 15 were primary schools, 16 had primary and secondary aged pupils and students, and 20 were secondary schools, including two with boarding facilities. Of the 51 schools, 26 of them admitted both boys and girls.
4. The schools were contacted during the week before the visit. Every effort was made to accommodate individual circumstances in relation to local festivals, visits, the absence of senior staff and examinations. One school was concerned about the provision for girls being inspected. Two schools expressed reservations about being 'continually under scrutiny'. The remaining schools, however, welcomed the opportunity to participate.
5. During the week before the first visits, inspectors held meetings for representatives of faith school organisations and discussed with them the appropriateness of the regulations. These discussions helped to frame the questions used in the survey, which also form the subheadings of this report. The meetings also provided evidence about the extent to which the regulations

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<sup>2</sup> The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003.

were seen as useful by the organisations and others with an interest in faith schools.

6. During the visits, inspectors observed a sample of lessons and held discussions with school leaders, teachers, pupils and parents. They scrutinised schemes of work and evaluated displays and teaching resources. Access to language experts was available when required.
7. About half the schools involved in the survey confirmed their links to a national organisation which was a source of advice on regulatory and curriculum matters.

## **Are the regulations for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development fit for purpose?**

8. Generally, the schools visited had designed their curriculum to be rooted fully within their faith tradition; they then checked this against the regulations to confirm their compliance. No school found a conflict between the regulations and their curriculum provision. The survey found examples where senior staff referred to the regulations to explain to parents why they had to teach elements of cultural development and citizenship. This was particularly helpful in those schools where aspects of personal development were seen by parents as contentious or significantly different from the view held by their faith.
9. In order to enhance their curriculum, four of the schools had developed networks successfully with other schools and local authorities, to develop this aspect of their work. They had established good working relationships and this professional contact had enabled understanding between staff and pupils, contributing significantly to community cohesion. However, the majority of the schools visited generally worked alone, with little opportunity for staff to discuss with other professionals the detail of the subjects they taught or teaching methods. The expense of attending external courses prevented some smaller schools working with others. Headteachers across all the schools in the survey commented on the need to be able to have access to expertise within local authorities or other organisations, to support the professional development of staff. Some expressed frustration at having to meet the costs of these links fully.
10. In all the schools visited, pupils gained a strong sense of personal worth and of belonging to their faith community. This was nurtured through their school's ethos, the taught curriculum and in regular individual and communal prayers and thanksgiving. The combination of all these elements was fundamental to the development of pupils' identity, sense of self-worth and esteem.
11. The majority of pupils talked confidently about themselves and their relationships with the local communities. Many were involved in local activities



as part of community service. They could identify aspects of the curriculum that helped them to see other people's points of view, understand other beliefs and appreciate the cultures of others.

### **Are the regulations sufficient, relevant and clear enough?**

12. The meetings with focus groups and with schools showed there was no real desire to discard any of the regulations. In different ways, leaders across all the schools expressed the view that the curriculum could be aligned to each regulation. However, agreement was unanimous that the regulations needed greater clarification. No school felt anything substantial was missing from the existing regulations.
13. Terminology used within the regulations caused some concern. For example, the use of the word 'community' in current guidance was considered too vague. Schools viewed the parents they served as a community. They also recognised the wider religious community and the surrounding local community. While the first two were linked, there was sometimes a wide gulf between the religious community and the wider local community. The meaning of 'community' requires clarification.
14. There was general agreement that young people should know about the city in which they lived, the country and its institutions, and the wider world. Christian, Jewish and Muslim schools, to different degrees, were striving to protect their young people from the perceived negative influences of the wider secular society. All accepted and taught about diversity and saw the promotion of community cohesion as requiring respect and acceptance of other faiths while remaining distinct in their own faith, rather than being a homogeneous cultural mix. As one teacher said: 'We like the idea of vegetable soup, where the separate vegetables can still be recognised'. One school expressed concern about a perceived threat to dilute the distinctiveness of faith schools.
15. There was extensive debate about what was meant by the term 'modern Britain', used in the letter sent by the Secretary of State when commissioning the survey. Schools were concerned that this term contained no specific values. A general consensus existed that, instead of the term 'modern Britain', the alternative should be 'preparing young people to be good citizens of the United Kingdom'. The key role for the schools was to enable young people to be 'good citizens', committed to participating positively in society, even though they themselves may be subject to anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, for example. The schools worked hard to develop the personal confidence of young people to deal with negative influences without compromising their beliefs. This included respect for members of other cultures and faiths. One school had organised an exhibition of its work at the local town hall, attended by 600 members of the public, to try to inform its neighbours about what went on inside the school and to combat ignorance.

16. Each faith tradition had a range of views about the extent to which pupils should participate in the wider secular community and their understanding about 'community life' (Regulation 2c) was different. For Jewish schools, educating children in their faith was seen as central to maintaining the Jewish community. For all the Muslim schools, an Islamic education was seen as the key to preparing young people to leave school as confident young British Muslims. For some of the schools, their concern was to protect children from the perceived negative influences of secular society, such as electronic media. Others had a clear programme for teaching pupils about how to remain a confident believer in the face of external influences, while maintaining the spirit of the regulation to promote tolerance and harmony.
17. Twelve of the schools visited raised concerns about any requirement to teach details of other faiths. In particular, leaders were concerned that it would be inappropriate to introduce younger children to the details of other faiths because they felt children were too young to distinguish between similarities and differences. A school leader summed up by saying: 'We don't want to know the details of what they believe but do need to know that they believe in something greater than themselves'.
18. Most of the survey schools saw spiritual development as separate from cultural development, and accepted there was a need for cultural understanding to be part of the regulations, rather than the detail of other faiths.<sup>3</sup> The survey found some confusion among school leaders about interpreting regulation 2e, that is, about the extent to which 'other cultures' and 'cultural traditions' were deemed to include faith and belief or not. Girls at a Muslim school commented articulately that there was a difference, for instance, between being a religious Muslim, a cultural Muslim and an Islamist. They recognised that religion and culture sat close to each other but, while religion was universal, culture was influenced by location. One said: 'We have people from the Sudan, Egypt, Bosnia, Pakistan, Morocco, Bengal and Singapore; each has a culture but what we have in common is our faith'.
19. The ethos of the schools visited was strongly influenced by the teachings of the faith. Rather than using the word 'tolerance', all the schools laid great emphasis on respect for and understanding of others. 'Tolerance' was misunderstood by some of the schools to have negative connotations and to mean 'putting up with low standards of ethical and social behaviour'. One headteacher clearly articulated a common thread in all of the schools when he suggested that many of the social ills of modern society were a direct consequence of a lack of

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<sup>3</sup> The requirement to teach about different faiths is not referred to explicitly in the regulations. Schools are required to assist pupils to appreciate and respect other cultures to promote tolerance and harmony between cultural traditions.

explicit teaching of higher moral values in secular schools. In his view, this was a major reason why parents sought a strong faith-based education.

## Should citizenship be referred to explicitly?

20. There was a concern that any changes to the regulations should retain the flexibility of present statements that allowed the schools to maintain their uniqueness and independence. However, several of the headteachers wanted the values required of good citizens to be defined more explicitly.
21. Citizenship was a key element of young people's education in all the schools visited and seven of the 20 secondary schools entered their pupils for GCSE citizenship. The schools saw being a citizen as participating in the democratic institutions of civic life and fulfilling the individual duty to the state as a requirement of their faith. An Algerian parent said: 'He committed himself to being a good British citizen as he swore allegiance to the United Kingdom and its head of state with Allah as his witness'. Pupils similarly spoke clearly about a dual identity: 'British citizens who practise Islam' and 'British Muslims'. In the Jewish schools, obedience to the law of the land is a long-held teaching. All the schools wanted to ensure that pupils developed a sense of belonging, first to the faith, then the country. The schools felt that the pupils had multiple identities but that, for the non-faith community, the key identity of belief was missing.
22. The schools differed in their views about the appropriate age to teach about other cultures and introduce other aspects, such as sex education. Some of the headteachers were concerned about introducing sex education to younger pupils. In one of the schools visited, however, this programme was being sensitively introduced to pupils in Year 5, in single-sex classes, using clear Islamic principles about the coming of 'the age of understanding' and the associated responsibility that went with it.
23. Enabling children to take initiative was often done within the bounds of tradition. For example, in a Muslim school, the girls did not challenge a teacher directly over an interpretation of scripture but indicated they wished to speak. Similarly, when asked to work in pairs or small groups, they were very conscious of others and their need to speak. Taking the initiative within the wider community was allowed. For example, Jewish pupils worked outside the school with younger children and the elderly and a Muslim school linked with a local Church primary school to work with younger children.
24. Displays around the schools often reflected what had been taught in classrooms in relation to citizenship. There were, however, instances of displays of teaching materials in eight of the schools that had a bias in favour of one group. For example, wording used to describe the situation in Palestine, seen in a Muslim school, used inflammatory language. Similarly, in a Jewish school, pupils' writing used strong language in describing situations in that part of the world.

Some of the published teaching materials seen contained biased or incorrect information about the beliefs of other religions.

25. In most cases, however, sensitive and controversial topics were managed effectively by staff. For example, the staff had to manage considerable emotion where there were direct connections between the pupils and the sensitive issues in certain parts of the world. In a Jewish school, the girls held views about Palestine that were influenced by events that had happened to relatives who live in the region. Scripture and commentaries were used to balance arguments successfully with most pupils but, for some with direct personal contact with conflict, there was a reluctance to move from their pre-formed ideas.
26. There was strong evidence of the positive impact the schools had had on the pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development and on being a good citizen. Parents praised the schools for the progress their children had made and for the self-confidence it had given them.
27. While preparation for transition to other schools was good within the faith schools, how pupils were treated, or perceived they were treated, when moving from faith primary schools to non-faith secondary schools was variable. For example, parents and headteachers described the difficulties pupils faced in maintaining their religious obligations and practices when they transferred to state schools. They felt some schools were reluctant to provide space for prayers. One parent questioned why a state school could provide facilities for prayer during Ramadan but not allow prayer for the rest of the year. There were also concerns about personal dress. A Muslim mother said: 'Our daughter found it difficult to dress in a western-based uniform, having been taught that modesty of traditional dress was appropriate as she entered adolescence. We were happy for her to dress traditionally but in the school uniform colours if this had been allowed'.
28. In the course of the survey, some parents said they wanted better opportunities for their children to further their religious development within the state sector. Where this was not possible, the parents had to rely on after-school religious tuition in alternative, part-time settings, which are not regulated by Ofsted.
29. Ten of the schools, including seven Christian schools, also had children from different faiths on their roll. In one such school, just under 15% of the pupils were from other faiths. Parents from Jewish, Muslim and Hindu backgrounds were clear that, if their children could not be admitted into a secondary school of their own faith, they would want their child educated in another faith school because they perceived its moral and religious stance would support their children.