
BRIEFING: UNREGISTERED RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS

Introduction

It is now well-known that a significant number of unregistered, illegal schools are operating through England, and it is equally well-known that many of these settings are religious in character. Such settings serve a variety of different religious communities, including Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities - all of which in some respect tend to be fundamentalist, extreme, or isolationist in their outlook. It is largely for this reason, that such communities see illegal schools rather than registered ones as preferable.

Figures

According to Ofsted Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman HMI in July, the unregistered schools team has identified **286** schools in the last 18 months suspected of operating illegally. Of those, **116** have been inspected and warning notices have been issued to **36**. There have been **zero** prosecutions. Spielman as claimed that one in five suspected illegal schools are religious, though it is [understood](#) that the overwhelming majority of settings to which warning notices have been issued are religious in character.

Ofsted estimates that around 6,000 children are attending illegal schools in England, but concedes that it is almost impossible to make an accurate estimate.

Charedi schools

Hackney is thought to be home to as many as 30 unregistered schools, predominantly serving the strictly orthodox Charedi Jewish community. Precise figures are hard to establish as to how many children attend these settings, but reasonable estimates are easily made using official data. A [2016 report](#) published by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research estimated that **at least 1,400 strictly Orthodox children aged 11-15 are being educated in illegal Jewish schools at any one time**. This estimate was reached by comparing the number of children registered in strictly Orthodox schools to the number of strictly orthodox children recorded by the 2011 Census. Other sources suggest the figure could be upwards of 2,000 pupils, and in any case the high birth rate within the community means that the figures will only rise in years to come.

Educational experience

The education provided in unregistered religious schools is known to be narrow in its scope, predominantly scriptural in its content, and deeply conservative, intolerant, and extreme in its outlook. In a [series of advice notes](#) to the Secretary of State for Education in 2015 and 2016, former Ofsted Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw detailed the findings of inspectors in a number of unregistered Muslim settings, including 'a narrow Islamic-focused curriculum', 'inappropriate books and other texts including misogynistic, homophobic and anti-Semitic material', and 'children and young people...at significant risk of harm and indoctrination'.

Similarly, Ofsted reports published by Humanists UK in 2016 exposed the situation within illegal Charedi schools, revealing that the curriculum 'encourages cultural and ethnic insularity' and prevents pupils from 'developing a wider, deeper understanding of different faiths, communities, cultures and lifestyles, including those of England.' Ofsted

also noted that 'as a matter of religious principle, the school does not provide a secular education except for mathematics lessons delivered by religious studies teachers in Yiddish on two or three occasions a week.'

Unregistered schools also tend to be housed in entirely unsuitable buildings, and former pupils report [widespread abuse and physical punishment](#).

Recent developments

Ofsted

Following sustained Humanists UK campaigning, Ofsted now has a dedicated team focused on identifying and investigating unregistered schools and has demonstrated more concern for the issue in recent years than at any time in its history. The new Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman has [picked up](#) where Sir Michael Wilshaw [left off](#), recently bemoaning the 'weaknesses in current legislation' that enable illegal religious schools to stay open and 'avoid proper scrutiny'. Speaking to the *Sunday Times* in July 2017 she said that inspectors needed more powers to 'protect the children on behalf of the children who attend these places'. This [echoes comments](#) made by Ofsted in November last year which called on the Government to 'bring forward new legislation to deal with unregistered schools more effectively' and to 'strengthen [Ofsted's] legal powers so we can close the settings immediately rather than go through the courts.'

Department for Education

The DfE has historically done very little to address the problem of unregistered schools, though in January 2016 it did [consult on proposals](#) to require all supplementary schools providing more than 6 to 8 hours of education a week to individual children to register with the DfE, meet certain regulatory standards, and face periodic inspection. **The proposals would have the effect of preventing illegal schools from masquerading as supplementary schools to avoid Ofsted inspection and the need to register, which Ofsted says is very common.** The DfE is yet to respond to the consultation, and [is understood](#) to have dropped them following CofE and Catholic lobbying.

Local Government Association

In September 2016 the Local Government Association (LGA) [called](#) on the UK Government to provide councils with greater powers to deal with illegal schools. The LGA, which represents 370 councils in England and Wales, claims that a lack of powers to enter homes and premises is limiting councils' ability to differentiate between children who are being legitimately home-schooled, receiving a suitably balanced education, and those who are actually being educated in illegal, unregistered schools.

The LGA recommended that a mandatory register of home-educated be introduced, a recommendation that has also been made by Ofsted.

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