



CHURCH OF ENGLAND
ARCHBISHOPS' COUNCIL
EDUCATION DIVISION



Church schools - effective, distinctive and inclusive

Bishop John Pritchard – first published in The Daily Telegraph, 19 November 2013

Today I will be addressing the Church of England's General Synod about the crucial importance of church schools both for society and the Church itself.

Last week I visited one of the 282 Church of England schools in my Diocese of Oxford. This was part of a regular series of visits my fellow bishops and I make to church schools around the country to encourage them and see the difference they are making to the lives of the million children who attend them.

For over 200 years, the Church of England has been a major provider of schools. It was in 1811 that Joshua Watson established the Church of England's National Society, the body which provided the first universal education in England and Wales. Today there are over 4,600 church schools in England making up 25% of all primary schools and 6% of all secondary schools.

Church schools were in the news again last week and we continue to explain that they exist primarily to benefit the pupils who attend them. But just as importantly, they are a central part of the mission of the Church of England to serve the common good.

We want church schools to be effective, distinctive and inclusive. To help them achieve that last year we published the Church School of the Future Report, which has led to new initiatives and ways of working designed to maintain high standards. We are also looking to our 43 dioceses, which currently spend over £15 million every year to support church schools (and increasingly help community schools as well), to increase this level of investment as local authority support for schools diminishes.

This demonstrates that in a more competitive educational landscape, we are not complacent about the performance of our schools. However, the good news is that we are already in a strong position as our schools already meet a great many essential targets.

The latest figures from Ofsted and DfE school performance and census data show that Church of England schools are highly effective. 76% of CofE Secondary schools are rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. That is 4% higher than the national average for non CofE schools. And 81% of CofE Primary schools are rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted, which is 3% higher than the national average for non CofE schools.

Of course, there are a number of reasons why our schools are effective. But one major factor is that our schools have a distinctive ethos, rooted in Christian values. Parents know that this ethos ensures that teachers value the gifts of every child and work hard to support their education. And children

thrive in an environment where their social, spiritual and emotional intelligence is developed alongside their academic performance.

Opponents of church schools try to find reasons to reduce the significance of the high performance of church schools. But, national figures show that our schools fully reflect the society in which we live.

At CofE secondary schools, 15% of CofE Secondary pupils are eligible for Free School Meals. With our mission to serve the poor and excluded, maybe this figure should be higher, but it is in line with the national average for non CofE schools which is also 15%.

One of the great accusations against church schools is that they are predominantly for white, middle class pupils whereas our statistics tell a different story. Our Secondary schools serve approximately the same percentage of Black or Minority Ethnic, BME, pupils as Non-CofE Secondary schools(25%.)

That's not surprising as families from all religious and ethnic backgrounds know that they will be supported at a church school with faith origins. In particular, the teaching of Religious Education at our schools encourages children to learn about other faiths and to prepare them for living in our multi-faith society.

All too often when I read the newspapers, I see church schools described in ways which the millions of parents and grandparents whose children attend them would not recognise. Rather than seeing them through the distorted lens of those who campaign against church schools, would it not be better to understand why they are so popular and see that the Church of England can offer solutions to some of the challenges facing education in this country, such as the shortage of primary school places? We have the experience and the skill.

In October, it was very gratifying to hear Lord Nash, the Schools Minister, say in the House of Lords that "Church schools are a highly valued part of our education establishment." The reason for this is because the church school is a national treasure, ready to serve the nation with excellent education far into the future.

Bishop of Oxford, John Pritchard, Chair of the Church of England's Board of Education