

This week, the Church of England will be doing what it has done for the past 200 years — bringing together people with a range of experience and expertise to consider how children of all backgrounds can be assured of the highest quality of educational outcomes, writes Nigel Genders.



The Parent Power tables in *The Sunday Times* include a disproportionate number of schools with a religious character among the top 100. Church of England, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu schools were all represented, with the study concluding that these schools more than hold their own in measures of academic rigour.

Our schools are sought after and successful, but not immune to the challenges facing the education sector — particularly in the rural areas where many of our schools are to be found.

Widely misunderstood, Church of England schools are not “faith” schools. They are not run by the church with the purpose of educating only those of a Christian faith. Instead they stand out as being open to children of all faiths — and none. They teach a broad range of faith views in religious education, only a minority have any sort of faith-based admission policy, and staff are drawn from diverse backgrounds.

Yet our schools are Christian in character. We hold this unashamedly at the core of our purpose. These aspirations might at first appear at odds — being deeply Christian yet serving a community of all faiths and none — yet the strength and success of today’s Church of England schools lies in the very fact that this combined vision has been challenged and negotiated frequently over its history.

We have always set out to offer a provision for all and our approach has stood the test of time, and of generations of parents of all faiths who value the diversity of community and spiritual nourishment being promoted.

Our Vision for Education is formed around Jesus's offer of "life in all its fullness": educating the whole person. The need for this has been amplified by this week's publication of NHS data showing alarming rates of mental illness among children.

The Church of England can be a leader in addressing this, by combining academic excellence with a rounded spiritual development and broad religious literacy that children and young people need for life in a pluralistic society. We help them to address the big questions, such as "Who am I?", "Why am I here?," "What do I desire?" and "How then shall I live?"

Today, although the majority of the 1m pupils attending Church of England schools are educated in urban settings, most of our schools are actually in rural areas. These are, on the whole, much smaller in size than their urban counterparts, and face different challenges.

This rural proliferation is explained by the fact that thousands of today's Church of England schools came into being shortly after 1811 when a group led by Joshua Watson, a wine merchant, founded an organisation called the National Society to provide free education for the poorest in society, 70 years before the Elementary Education Act would legalise this right. The object of the society was "to instruct and educate the poor in suitable learning, works of industry and the principles of the Christian religion according to the established church".

At the time, the population of England was roughly equal to the number of people now in London alone, far more rural and spread out than in modern society. As a result, hundreds of schools were built to serve thriving rural communities, alongside shops, post offices, saddlers, joiners, blacksmiths and more. As these services have faded away, our rural schools take on greater significance to the identity of their communities.

Many such rural schools are officially "small" (fewer than 210 pupils) or "very small" (fewer than 110). More than a fifth of the pupils we educate fall into this category, attending one of more than 2,000 schools.

If we were starting our schools network from scratch, a town planner might say that we would best be served by fewer, larger schools, situated outside large towns. On the same basis as out-of-town supermarkets, they would be seemingly more efficient, trading increased travel for lower costs.

But children's futures are not a product we can simply pick up off the shelf, and schools are not — and must never be — run on the logic of a supermarket.

While it is true that the cost of educating a child might be higher in a rural area, we also understand the value to children of receiving their education in this setting, and of rural schools as rich expressions of their community.

Yet that does not mean we can't learn new lessons, think of ways of working "smarter" and sometimes do things differently. While we are proud of the record of church schools, we must never be complacent. We must continue to ensure that children growing up in small rural communities have the same educational opportunities and access to a broad range of staff expertise and facilities as those in bigger schools in cities.

Earlier this year we published measures whereby rural schools can embrace changes needed to ensure good learning outcomes for the children and young people in their communities. Following this, and a number of regional conferences, we welcome delegates to this week's Rural Schools Symposium, to be held at Lambeth Palace.

All those attending have been given a simple instruction: to come equipped with ideas for working smarter and more closely in partnerships to maintain the rich diversity of educational offerings across the country. At their best, our rural schools provide all this in abundance.

There will be no magic solutions for the financial challenges our rural schools face, and the right solution in one instance may not be a good fit for another.

Nevertheless, as pupils, parents and staff at schools across the country look ahead to nativities, carol services and a well-earned rest at the end of a long term, they can do so with the promise that we are working just as hard to keep rural schools a nurturing environment in which pupils and staff can continue to thrive.

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