

# Illegal faith schools

A significant number of unregistered, illegal schools are operating through England, many of which are religious. Such settings serve a variety of different religious communities, including Muslim, Jewish, and Christian – all of which, in some respect, tend to be fundamentalist, extreme, or isolationist in their outlook. It is for this reason that leaders in these communities see illegal schools as preferable to registered ones, which face inspection and must meet a variety of minimum standards.

We lead the national campaign for action on unregistered religious schools and work closely with former pupils of such settings, as well as current members of closed religious communities, to highlight their experiences and provide evidence to the authorities. Over the years, our work has secured repeated, high-profile media attention on the issue and prompted the establishment of Ofsted's unregistered schools team, as well as a council enquiry into unregistered schools in Hackney.

In 2022, and as a result of our campaign, the Government proposed to [legislate](#) to close the [legal loopholes](#) that enable illegal schools to operate, and grant Ofsted greater powers to investigate and close them down. However, following the change in Government in the autumn of 2022, [the Schools Bill was dropped](#), and so these legislative plans are once again up in the air.

## In depth

### Experience of pupils in unregistered schools

In 2019, Ofsted [revealed that](#) close to 6,000 pupils are being educated in illegal schools and, in early 2020, the inspectorate repeated a [call to Government to take action on the problem](#). The education provided in many 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'.

In March 2018, the current Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, [told the Education Select Committee](#) that intolerant and extremist teaching in unregistered faith schools was 'as bad as it has ever been and is deteriorating rather than improving'. She also expressed serious concerns about teaching materials found in these schools, including 'books by people banned from entering the country,' and 'books advocating men beating their wives as punishment'.

Similarly, Ofsted reports published by [us 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.' Former pupils report that they only study the Talmud and the Torah, often for fourteen hours a day, six days a week, and leave education as adults unable to speak any English, in spite of sometimes being third or fourth generation Londoners. They report having frequently experienced physical abuse by staff and being aware of child sexual exploitation as well.

## Inadequate legislation

In 2018, we welcomed the [first successful prosecution](#) of the proprietors of an illegal school. This was followed by another in early 2019. However, currently, relevant authorities like Ofsted and [local councils do not have sufficient powers](#) to investigate and close all unregistered schools, and some of those operating them have even [vowed to continue doing so](#) after prosecution. This is because some illegal schools argue that by only operating for a limited number of hours and/or only providing religious instruction, they do not meet the [definition of an independent school](#), and so do not have to register as such. Rather, the illegal schools claim that they are 'supplementary' or 'out-of-school settings' (meaning that Ofsted does not have the power to inspect them), and the pupils attending them receive their main education at home. Presently, there is no requirement for home-schooled pupils to be registered with the authorities. We first became aware of this loophole in the law in 2015, not long after the schools started using it.

In 2018, the Department for Education [publicly acknowledged this issue](#) for the first time and, in 2019, launched [a consultation on a compulsory register of home-educated pupils](#). It also committed to making legislative changes to

address the problem of illegal schools as part of the [Integrated Communities Strategy Action Plan](#).

In May 2022 the Government published the [Schools Bill](#), parts 3 and 4 of which would have introduced a register of home educated children, and give Ofsted more powers to inspect independent educational settings. However the Bill was [dropped](#) in its entirety in December 2022 because of controversial aspects in part one, which was about making all schools become academies in the next decade.

## Calls for reform

We campaign for the introduction of the legal provisions necessary to take meaningful action against such schools. As part of this we call for robust regulation of [out-of-school settings](#) or part-time schools (e.g. madrassas and yeshivas), many of which are known to operate covertly as full-time illegal schools.

We have been public in calling for such reforms for some time. In 2016, for instance, we called for the regulation of out-of-school settings in [response to a consultation](#), launched as part of the Government's Counter Extremism Strategy. Those proposals were subsequently dropped following Church of England and Catholic Church lobbying – due to unfounded concerns about regulation of Sunday schools. The consulted-on proposals were explicitly constructed to only focus on settings that have individual pupils for more than eight hours each week, which would generally exclude Sunday schools. Humanists UK [became aware of the churches' influence](#) in summer 2017 and then, that December, working with the Liberal Democrat front bench, got the Archbishop of Canterbury [to admit he personally lobbied](#) the Prime Minister to drop the proposals. In their place, the Government decided to consult on a [flimsy voluntary code of practice](#) for out-of-school settings which has yet to be introduced.

## What we've been doing

Our work leading the campaign against illegal, unregistered religious schools in the UK includes:

- Launching the whistleblowing and blogging website [Faith Schoolers Anonymous](#), along with former pupils of illegal schools.
- Driving repeated media coverage on this issue, for example [BBC News at Six/Ten](#), [BBC London News](#), [Victoria Derbyshire](#), [the Independent](#), and the

[Evening Standard](#), among others. A [2016 exposé aired on Newsnight](#)

revealed that a number of illegal religious schools are nonetheless registered as charities with educational purposes, accruing all the benefits that charity status affords.

- Prompting the creation of Ofsted's unregistered schools team, and being the first external group to meet with that team, following a series of exposés and reports on unregistered schools.
- Holding the first meeting between Ofsted, the DfE, and former pupils of illegal religious schools, who provided valuable evidence on the experience of children within such settings.
- Securing recommendations in the 2016 [Casey Review on integration](#) for action on 'segregated, supplementary and unregistered, illegal faith schools', in line with evidence we submitted to the review.
- Repeatedly calling on the Government to address gaps in the law that prevent illegal schools from being shut down and prevent the children within them from receiving their right to an education.
- Holding a [meeting in parliament](#) for MPs/peers to hear about the experience of a former illegal school pupils.
- [Prompting a consultation on unregistered schools](#) (through our media work) held by Hackney Council, a local authority in which more than 1,000 boys are known to be taught illegally in strictly Orthodox Charedi Jewish schools. The subsequent report echoed all of Humanists UK's recommendations.
- Working with parliamentarians to repeatedly raise the issues in Parliament, for example through the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group (APPHG), and with the Labour and Liberal Democrat front-benches. This included working with APPHG member Lord Solely to inform his private members bill on home education which proposed a compulsory register of home-educated children and [helped prompt the Government to commit to taking action](#) on the issue.
- [Briefing the House of Commons Education Select Committee](#) on unregistered schools and calling for a full parliamentary inquiry.

All of this work prompted the Government to acknowledge the problem of illegal schools will only be solved by [changes in the law](#), including greater powers for Ofsted, a register of independent settings providing full-time education, and a register of [home educated pupils](#).

## Get involved

Support Humanists UK by [becoming a member](#). That helps in itself, and you can help even more by supporting our campaigns in the ways suggested above. But campaigns also cost money – quite a lot of money – and we also need financial support. You can [make a donation to Humanists UK](#).

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