



Address by the Rt Hon Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families at the “Keeping Faith in the System” conference

14th October 2009

Thanks Ronke.

And let me also thank Oona for her speech and for the leading role that she has played along with the Catholic Education Service and other faith groups in organising today’s event.

It is now just over two years since we launched our Faith in the System document at the British Library.

It was a hugely important event.

And it came just a few months after I began this job – in fact, the speech I made then was one of the very first speeches I gave as Secretary of State.

I was very much a novice then.

I’m now a veteran – in fact, in the next few weeks, I’ll become the second longest serving Secretary of State since Kenneth Baker.

But I do believe – and I hope you all agree – that Faith in the System was a landmark document.

Because it was the first time that all of you and we in government came together to set out our shared understanding of the important contribution that faith schools make to our country.

And it’s only right that representatives of all of the different faiths are here with us again today to reaffirm our commitment to it and look at what more we can do to build on the progress that we’ve made together.

Over the past two and a half years, I’ve visited over 220 schools around the country – including special schools, primary schools, secondary schools and many faith schools too.

And I’ve seen that:

- inspirational teaching – and we do have the best generation of teachers we’ve ever had;
- and an engaging, flexible curriculum;

both make a real difference.

But I’ve also seen that the things that make the biggest difference to the lives of children and young people::

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- excellent leadership from head teachers, leadership teams and school governors;
- strong parental engagement and being at the heart of the community;
- a focus on the progress of every child;
- and a culture of high aspirations based on a belief that every child has the potential to succeed and no barrier should be allowed to hold back the progress of any child.

These are all qualities and characteristics that are we often find in our faith schools.

It would be impossible for me to mention all the great examples I've seen.

But I will mention a few examples.

The first is a school in my constituency – St John the Baptist Catholic Primary.

And it is a school that is well known for its success, which is put down to the value that it places on every child in the school and the way that it puts their wellbeing above everything else.

There's also another school just down the road – Stanley St Peters CE Primary – that I visited last year.

I attended a special assembly for the retiring head teacher who had done so much to drive improvement – and then we visited the co-located children's centre so it really was the central hub for the families and the local community.

I had the pleasure of opening Yavneh College in Hertfordshire with the Chief Rabbi last year.

It was an amazing visit because thousands of pupils, parents, staff and members of the local community turned up for the opening – and they'd done so because they were deeply committed to high quality education.

And having visited the site earlier this year, I know there will be similar passion and commitment at the JCROSS school in Barnet when it opens next September.

I visited a Catholic secondary school in Norwich – Notre Dame High School – which is actually the only Catholic secondary school in Norfolk.

It was actually the school my mum went to when she was young.

And the most striking thing there wasn't how committed the staff there were to their local community;

nor was it the science partnership that the school had struck with the University of East Anglia;

it was meeting the school council and hearing how proud they were of their excellent results and also hearing them talking about all of the things they were doing to be good citizens.

But none of these are exceptional faith school stories.

Over the past decade, faith schools have consistently achieved excellent results:

- at Key Stage 2, 87% of faith school pupils now reach Level 4 in English compared to 81% of pupils nationally;

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- almost 10% more pupils in faith schools now achieve five good GCSEs including English and maths compared to the national average – that's 58% of faith school pupils compared to 48% nationally;
- and the rate of improvement has been faster in faith schools.

And what we want to do now is take the lessons that you've learnt and the things that you know have made a difference and spread them much more widely across the whole state school system.

But despite all of your achievements, I've seen too that some sections do still criticise the faith school system and talk about it being "broken".

I say to them that the vibrancy, dynamism and success of schools with a religious character has never been stronger.

And that's really why we wanted to work with you two years ago to publish the Faith in the System document and why we're here again today.

Ensuring that there are schools that meet the needs of the local area is ultimately – and rightly in my view – a decision for local communities.

But it isn't a question of yes or no in my mind.

As I said when we published Faith in the System two years ago, I fully support and am committed to the role of faith schools in our education system.

After all, we are talking about almost a third of our schools – because there are just under 6,800 maintained faith schools in our country:

- serving a wide range of different faiths and denominations – indeed many faith schools have pupils from just as wide a range of faiths as any other school;
- providing for the needs of their local community;
- and offering diversity and choice to parents.

And we are also talking about many faiths whose historic commitment to education – in particular for the poorest and most disadvantaged – dates back far longer than the state education system itself.

I said two years ago that there were three areas where I wanted us to work together:

- on continuing to ensure that all state schools admit pupils on a fair basis – including all those who use faith-based criteria;
- on ensuring that all schools including faith schools promote community cohesion;
- and on developing stronger partnerships across the whole schools system – including faith schools and non-faith schools in both the maintained and independent sectors.

And I want to say a few words about the progress that we've made in each of these areas.

So first, on fair admissions.

I was really pleased that we were able to publish a new School Admissions Code last February that that underlines our commitment to all schools preserving their own ethos;

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but also sets out that the system must be fair and independently monitored.

I hope you will all agree that it was a big step forward.

And I also hope you will agree that strengthening the role of governing bodies and extending the powers of the Schools Adjudicator to independently monitor the system were also big steps forward.

We have only been able to do so because of your unequivocal support and encouragement.

And I'd also like to thank you all for your hard work in helping us to implement it so that parents and pupils get the clarity and consistency they need.

We now have to listen to parents – including through the new annual survey of parents views about the choice of schools on offer to them in their local areas that we announced in our Schools White Paper.

But faith schools and non-faith schools alike, I do believe that we are in a much stronger position than we were two years ago.

The second area where I believe we are in a much stronger position is on promoting community cohesion.

When we launched Faith in the System, the new duty on schools to promote community cohesion was just about to come in.

It has now formed part of Ofsted inspections for the last year.

I've seen for myself how faith schools are using their unique ethos to develop well-rounded young people who have a strong sense of community and respect for others – including those of different faiths and backgrounds.

In many ways, they are leading the way and are some of the best exemplars we have on promoting community cohesion because many faith schools are more diverse than other schools.

And the first Ofsted inspections have seen many faith schools judged to be good or outstanding on community cohesion.

My third point was about developing stronger partnership working.

As we saw in the film, there are some great examples of faith schools working in partnership with other schools.

And whether it's on sport, the curriculum, making the most of budgets or on school improvement, I do believe that partnership working is the way forward.

We have some great examples – including the Ossett Community Trust in my constituency where a secondary school and eight primary schools – including a Church of England voluntary aided primary school – are working together to drive up standards in all of the schools and allow pupils and staff to access new opportunities in music, sport and learning.

It is already the case that:

- all maintained secondary schools – including faith schools – are now part of a school sport partnership in which they might be sharing PE staff, offering new opportunities for pupils by sharing sports facilities and playing competitive sports against one other;

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- 98% of maintained secondary schools and Academies including faith schools are now in school partnerships to improve behaviour and tackle persistent absences;
- and almost 400 faith schools are now involved in delivering our new Diplomas – that's almost a sixth of all schools involved.

We know that working with a successful school in a federation or shared trust can provide other schools with the support they need to improve.

I'm really pleased that of the 43 National Challenge Trusts that we've now announced, 7 include faith schools working to support other schools.

And I hope that more faith schools from both the maintained and independent sector will get involved and share more of the things that are working so well for them.

These partnerships are primarily about leadership but partnerships can also help promote community cohesion.

Almost 70 faith schools – including 3 independent faith schools – are already registered on our national Schools Linking Network.

And I know there are many more examples of successful linking projects around the country between inner-city and rural schools or between schools of different faiths where pupils' horizons are being broadened as they learn about each other.

You'll be hearing more about how some schools have successfully done so later today.

And I want to see more linking projects as part of our commitment to Faith in the System.

So I can announce today that we are giving an extra £50k to the Schools Linking Network to work with the Three Faiths Forum specifically to support more linking projects involving different faith schools from both the maintained and independent sectors.

I hope you will encourage your schools to get involved and be part of linking projects.

Because I do believe that if schools can find the right way for them to work together and we can give them the support they need, they can achieve more than they can on their own and support the progress of all children in young people in their communities.

And in return, I will make sure you get the support you need.

I do place enormous value on the diversity we have in the system.

And I do believe that voluntary aided schools have an important role to play alongside Academies – including faith Academies – and trusts.

So I am committed to ensuring that they remain part of our education system.

We must also make sure you get the support you need from other services.

We've introduced new legislation following our consultation to strengthen Children's Trusts in every area.

I am clear that just as faith schools will have a duty to be a part of them, Children's Trust Boards will also have a duty to consult all local partners including faith schools.

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And I know you are working on a guide to help spread examples of best practice working between Local Authorities and faith schools in their areas.

Let me end by saying that I believe that we have a great partnership.

I hope it is stronger now than ever before as a result of the strong, united message that we sent out and the progress that we've made together.

As Oona said, there are some difficult issues.

But as we have seen, we can overcome them by working together.

I am confident that our partnership it can be even stronger in the future as we continue to make more progress towards our shared goal of helping every child and young person to fulfil their potential.

This conference today is another important step.

And I look forward to continuing to work with you in the months and years to come.

Thank you.

Rt Hon Ed Balls MP
Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families