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# Church to fight back with 200 new schools

*Jack Grimston, Education Correspondent* Published: 18 March 2012



THE  
Church  
of  
England  
is to  
open

John Pritchard said expansion would build on the popularity of church schools (Gill Allen)

hundreds of new schools to spread Christian education and confront the growth of “aggressive secularism”.

The expansion plan will also see the church offering its services to secular schools, advising them on areas such as improving academic performance and designing their religious curriculum. Other initiatives could include multi-faith schools shared between Anglicanism and other religions.

The move comes just days after Rowan Williams announced he was quitting as Archbishop of Canterbury. Speaking before Williams’s announcement, John Pritchard, chairman of the Church of England’s board of education, said expansion would build on church schools’ popularity with parents and their record of academic achievement.

A Church of England report, to be published on Friday, finds that Anglican schools now bring more people into contact with Christianity than Sunday church worship. Pritchard, who is Bishop of Oxford, believes this makes them ideally placed to confront secularism, which he described as a “good, healthy challenge because it brings us out of our comfort zone”.

“The whole national context is one in which secularist debates, whether it be on equality, gay marriage, employment in schools, a whole range of different things, are bringing up the issues of secularist versus [religious] approaches to society’s life,” added Pritchard, rated by the bookmaker Paddy Power as a 20-1 bet to be the next Archbishop of Canterbury.

Pritchard accused the government for being “scared” of religious education (RE). He said the decision by Michael Gove, the education secretary, not to include it in the new English baccalaureate of core academic subjects had been largely responsible for a decline of up to 30% in the time devoted to teaching it in many schools.

“Successive secretaries of state have discovered that it [religion] is such a contentious area and because the level of religious illiteracy in our society is so high, that we don’t know as governments or as society how to handle religious diversity. So they want to stay away from it and say RE is compulsory, that is sufficient, let’s get on and do other things,” Pritchard said.

He said the number of training places for RE teachers had been cut from 660 to 400 in two years and that two-thirds of courses had become so small they may cease to be viable. The Department for Education, which has been discussing the future of faith schools with the Church of England for the past 18 months, strongly denied ministers were scared of RE and said they had repeatedly spoken up for faith schools.

The government has given assurances that church schools will be allowed to retain their admissions policies and that religious representatives will not lose seats on governing bodies if they become academies. This is designed to allay concerns that have prevented many from applying.

In addition, Gove plans to send copies of the King James Bible to every school in the country. Sponsorship is being raised and printing will start within a few weeks.

The Church of England educates about 1m children and runs 4,800 of the country’s 23,000 state schools. Pritchard forecasts that another 200 could open over the next five years under the government’s academies and free schools programme, which he believes has brought about a much-needed overhaul of education. In addition to the new schools, Pritchard said the church could offer support once provided by local education authorities, which were in widespread decline. This could encourage secular schools to introduce a more spiritual dimension to their teaching, even if it is not explicitly Christian.

“It [the report] will be talking a lot about partnerships,” Pritchard said. “We want to say we have got expertise, you can trust us, we are not manipulative, we are not evangelistic, we are about serving.”

More controversially, he also believes that the need to reach out to wider segments of the population will lead to Anglican schools reducing the proportion of their children who are awarded places on the basis of their parents’ faith.

He pointed out that only 67 Anglican secondary schools now admitted more than half their intake on the basis of religion, and forecast that this figure would decline.

## 'Hit squad'

Six academy schools, part of the programme to reform English education, have performed so poorly they have been issued with government warnings that they risk being taken over by Whitehall-appointed hit squads.

They will be subject to close monitoring and if they fail to improve quickly enough, could ultimately have their head teachers sacked, governors replaced with appointees and sponsors removed.

The six are the first academies to be subject to “pre-warning” letters, issued by Lord Hill, the schools minister.

The schools’ names could not be confirmed this weekend but are believed to include the Marlowe academy in Ramsgate, Kent, sponsored by Roger De Haan, former head of Saga holidays; and St Aldhelm’s, in Poole, Dorset, which obtained the worst GCSE grades in the country, according to results released in January. The academy is sponsored by Bournemouth University and the diocese of Salisbury.

A government source said: “The vast majority of academies are successful, but if any school, whether an academy or not, is not performing well and letting down pupils, the government will take action.”