

British Students Exposed to Extremism

By MARGARET COKER

LONDON—Several majority Muslim state schools have exposed pupils to extremist ideas and endangered their welfare by fostering a culture of fear and intimidation, British regulators said Monday.

The findings, detailed by Education Secretary Michael Gove in a report to Parliament, came as a result of emergency inspections sparked by allegations that Muslim school administrators in Birmingham were plotting to radicalize youth there.

The findings show that five schools deviated from nationally approved curriculum in ways that support their Islamic faith, including allowing an assembly speaker known for his support of militant jihad to speak to students.

However, the report didn't cite evidence of an organized plot by extremists.

The schools rejected the report, saying that they don't promote radicalism, and pointed to a previous record of excellent ratings.

"Children have been exposed to things that they should not be exposed to. We must put the promotion of British values at the heart" of education, Mr. Gove said.

The immediate effects of the report by Britain's education regulator, Ofsted, are limited.

The regulatory findings have resulted in a ratings downgrade of the five schools, allowing for the removal of school leaders. However, the findings don't subject them to criminal or other legal inquiries.

Mr. Gove in March ordered the inquiry into what the media has called the "Trojan Horse Affair," after an anonymous letter alleged that Muslim leaders were plotting to take over the schools, sparking a national debate about security and perceptions of Islam in Britain.

The inquiry has proved divisive

for the ruling Conservative party, and Mr. Gove's address to Parliament on Monday provided a chance for the government to show a unified front. Last week, the controversy about the probe sparked an embarrassing intramural argument between Mr. Gove and the nation's top cop, Home Secretary Theresa May, sparking a rebuke from the prime minister's office.

Outside of the ruling party, reaction to the Gove inquiry was immediate and sharp. The Birmingham schools, the national teacher's union, the Muslim Council of Britain and opposition lawmakers called the probe a politicized move and said the findings unfairly linked all Islamic teachings and terrorism.

The reports are expected to have long-term consequences for the entire British education system. Mr. Gove said he was going to revamp the regulatory process in the country to allow more centralized control. Among the schools downgraded by the regulator is Park View Academy, once considered the best school for inner-city students in Birmingham.

A board member of the school described the government inspections by Ofsted, Britain's education regulator, as "a witch hunt."

"Ofsted inspectors came to our schools looking for extremism, looking for segregation, looking for proof that our children have religion forced upon them as part of an Islamic plot. The Ofsted reports find absolutely no evidence of this because this is categorically not what is happening at our schools," said David Hughes.

The nine-page report found that some school leaders have exposed children to radicalized messages and what it described as inappropriate teachings, such as creationism.

"A culture of fear and intimidation has developed in some of the schools," the report said, with some

teachers saying they have been pushed out of their jobs and that there was an organized attempt in some schools to "alter their character or ethos."

The head of Ofsted said that his regulators found that one of the schools, which he didn't name, invited a guest speaker with known extremist views to address pupils. In another case, a school subsidized a trip to Saudi Arabia exclusively for Muslims, Michael Wilshaw said.

Some of the schools under investigation are 99% Muslim. British state schools require religious education. Administrators "are exerting far more influence than is appropriate or acceptable," said Mr. Wilshaw. Ofsted oversees matters related to curriculum, teaching standards and child safety in all of Britain's state schools.

It is supposed to investigate both mundane matters such as the number of emergency exits in schools as well as the school's efforts at combating bullying or extremism.

However, there are no detailed standards for schools on their requirements to battle extremism, according to an Ofsted official.

"We all know what an outstanding school looks like...and what it doesn't look like," said Andrew Bell.

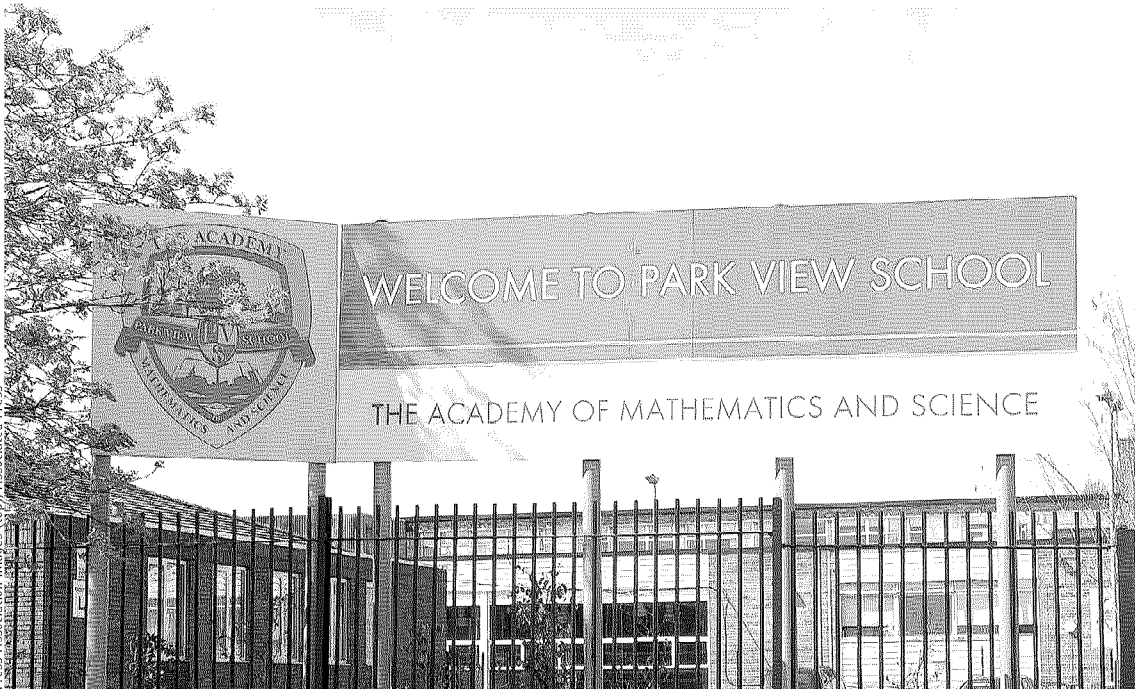
In 2012, Park View received the regulators' highest rating as part of a routine inspection.

It boasted some of the best exam scores of Birmingham schools and the school leadership was asked to take over the administration of two failing schools.

All the schools under Park View directorship had their school rating downgraded in the Gove report. Mr. Gove has ordered the schools into receivership and will replace the administrators.

Mr. Wilshaw said the difference between the two findings reflects a significant change in school leadership since 2012.





Press Association Images (top); Associated Press

Education Secretary Michael Gove, top, ordered an investigation into whether Muslim administrators of mostly Muslim schools in Birmingham, including Park View School, were trying to radicalize the student body.