

**From:** Pavan Dhaliwal [mailto:press@humanism.org.uk]

**Sent:** 11 April 2012 10:23

**To:** Pavan Dhaliwal

**Subject:** EMBARGOED: Legal action against state-funded religious schools opening 'by the back door'

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 THURSDAY 12 APRIL 2012**

The British Humanist Association (BHA) and [Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign](#) (RISC) have joined forces to bring legal action against Richmond Council, which is seeking to open state-funded, selective Roman Catholic schools outside of competition.

[New rules](#) that came into force on 1 February state that 'If a local authority in England think a new school needs to be established in their area, they must seek proposals for the establishment of an Academy' [i.e. a Free School]. Proposals are then adjudicated by the Department for Education (DfE).

Richmond Council has been clear that it thinks the borough needs a Catholic secondary school to complement its existing Catholic primaries, and that there is also a need for a new Catholic primary to provide additional places. They say that the Act allows them to go ahead with Voluntary Aided Catholic schools without first following the above rule. The BHA is concerned that this offers a way of opening religious schools in the face of public opposition by the back door, avoiding the competition that would otherwise be required.

RISC, a local grass-roots campaign against the threat of a discriminatory new school which ran a petition supported by well over 3,000 local people, has tried to prevent this but is being rebuffed by the council. In this situation, the BHA has stepped in to support legal action against the Council in support of the need for other bids to be considered.

Jeremy Rodell, the coordinator of RISC, said 'Our primary focus is to ensure that any new schools opening in the borough cannot discriminate against children simply because of the religion or beliefs of their parents. RISC has strong local support, ranging from humanists to fair-minded Catholics, but lacks the resources to mount a legal challenge alone. So we very much welcome the BHA's decision to take this case forward.'

BHA Chief Executive Andrew Copson said, 'We have seen repeatedly how religious providers largely avoid competition when establishing state-funded schools, and instead make arrangements directly with local authorities to open schools without local people being offered any alternative. These approaches to local authorities have always been successful. If the practice is not challenged, we face a future of discriminatory state-funded religious schools being opened without the same rules applying to them as to inclusive schools. In an ideal education system, there would be no state-funded religious discrimination at all, but for as long as it is unfortunately permitted, at least new schools should be opened as a result of fair competition on a level playing field.'

'It is unacceptable that the system is so biased in favour of religious bids, and that local authorities are collaborating so much with religious organisations to open schools in this undemocratic way. Any case that can seek to redress this balance, by narrowing the range of circumstances in which faith-based proposals can avoid competition, and therefore increasing democratic choice and accountability, is to be welcomed.'

## Notes

For further comment or information contact BHA Chief Executive Andrew Copson on 07534 248596 or at [andrew@humanism.org.uk](mailto:andrew@humanism.org.uk).

Read the new rules on school organisation, introduced by the Education Act 2011:  
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/21/schedule/11/enacted>

Read more about the British Humanist Association's work on 'faith' schools:  
<http://www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/religion-and-schools/faith-schools>

Read the BHA's table of types of school with a religious character:  
<http://www.humanism.org.uk/uploads/documents/schools-with-a-religious-character.pdf>

Visit Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign's website:  
<http://www.richmondinclusiveschools.org.uk/>

The British Humanist Association is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. It promotes a secular state and equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief.