

# Making it a Catholic academy

## Voicing our Gaza fears

Sir – Stephanie Bennett (Letters, October 31) is wrong to equate faith-based over-subscription criteria with distance-based criteria.

Schools that cater primarily for local children help to build strong communities, and provide clear benefits in terms of green-travel and the freeing up of children's time for other more useful activities than sitting on buses or trains.

In our densely packed borough we do get house price gradients around popular schools, but that is because there are not enough good school places, or houses, to go around.

The system is under severe strain, but that is no excuse for privileging one faith group over others.

Schools that restrict their admissions to a single faith just further complicate the system for everybody else.

I know several Twickenham families who are now looking for spaces at comprehensive secondary schools in neighbouring boroughs, because they cannot get into a good school locally.

When they see children travelling from the borough boundaries and beyond to St Richard Reynolds they are understandably resentful, knowing their own children will now be forced to make a long journey in the opposite direction to accommodate them.

### CLANCY TW2

Sir – Some of the recent letters about St Richard Reynold's Catholic School (SRR) miss the point about what is currently happening, and what the school could do to put it right.

Back in 2012, the council fought and, with Department for Education support, won a judicial review of its decision to establish SRR as voluntary aided (VA) Catholic schools, rather than academies.

The reason they fought for VA status was because a new Catholic academy would have been limited by Government rules to a maximum of 50 per cent faith-based selection when over-subscribed.

The council went along with the church's insistence on up to 100 per cent faith-based selection.

That is only possible for a new school with a VA structure.

So it may seem strange that SRR is now proposing to convert from VA to academy status. The explanation is very simple: the "50 per cent rule" only applies to new faith-based academies.



**Nina Phillips spotted these webs on gates around Richmond at this bewitching time of year, but angered Borough View by claiming some kind of bias toward stag pictures (see page 6). If you have a picture you would like published in our weekly Borough View slot, email it to [lettersrtt@london.newsquest.co.uk](mailto:lettersrtt@london.newsquest.co.uk).**

It does not apply to established schools that convert to academies. So, by opening in 2013 as VA and then in 2014 proposing to convert to an academy, SRR aims to secure the benefits of academy status, but keep the secondary's near-100 per cent Catholic-only over-subscription criterion.

By any standards, this is a cynical exploitation of a loophole in rules specifically designed to make faith schools more inclusive.

The effect will be that children from Catholic families – even if they live in Feltham or Hammersmith (current real examples) – will continue to get priority at this state-funded school over children from non-Catholic families living round the corner in west Twickenham.

This is fundamentally unfair, especially when the pressure on local school places remains high and increasing.

We think the school should do the honourable thing and amend its admissions policy to 50 per cent at the same time as converting to academy status.

Why not?

**JEREMY RODELL**  
Richmond Inclusive  
Schools Campaign

Sir – I disagree with Stephanie Bennett's assertion that St Richard Reynolds students are freeing up large numbers of places at other borough schools. Most are freeing up places at less desirable Catholic schools in neighbouring boroughs, which will now be filled by Catholic children from even further away.

Of course some Catholic families prefer community secondary schools, and they have every right to choose Waldegrave, Orleans Park and Teddington if they can.

It is only those of that subset that cannot get places at popular over-subscribed schools who will free up community places by taking up lower-preference places at the school instead.

However, the freed-up places will be at schools that are understandably less popular because they have not yet reached appropriate quality standards.

So, in effect, Catholic families get first dibs on the shiny new school places, and everyone else gets the unwanted leftovers.

That is not a recipe for good community relations. Ms Bennett also points out that the council is investing in school improvement at less popular schools.

That is welcome, and long overdue.

However, it does not compensate for lack of community access to the school because the schools in question will themselves be over-subscribed the moment they get a decent Ofsted report.

### NAME AND ADDRESS SUPPLIED

Sir – Your correspondent Stephanie Bennett claims that the Catholic diocese of Westminster put its hand deep in its pocket when it established St Richard Reynolds Catholic College (SRR) to save the Richmond taxpayer a good deal from the public purse.

However, she is wearing rose-tinted spectacles.

The college consists of two schools, a primary and a secondary.

Both are located on the same site, which was purchased entirely from council funds, for £8.5m.

The £1.5m capital building costs for the primary were also paid for entirely from council funds, due to acute basic need for community primary places (not specifically Catholic places) in central Twickenham.

It is only the estimated £5m-£8m capital building costs for the secondary that

are being covered by a combination of Diocesan funds and local fundraising by the SRR school governors.

The sum may seem large, but not when one considers the privilege that it buys: exclusive governance of, and access to, a greater choice of school places for the Catholic community of Richmond for the next 125 years.

If the school had been set up as a Catholic academy, then central Government would have covered those costs instead, and 50 per cent of the places would then have been open to the wider community.

As there is now an imminent shortage of secondary places, and the Government is struggling to find a site for a community free school that will help to meet it, it is difficult to describe the establishment of SRR as a good deal for local taxpayers.

Of course the most significant cost of any school over its lifespan is its running cost, which will be at least £5.5m-a-year for SRR when it reaches its full size.

All of those running costs are met by the taxpayer.

The Richmond Schools Forum, which has a consultative role in relation to the local distribution of school funding, expressed concern in its meeting of January 2013 that other local schools would be unnecessarily deprived of funding as a result of providing places that did not fulfil basic need.

Voluntary aided schools do need to contribute a small amount (10 per cent) to any ongoing capital costs, but these are, on average, very small in comparison to the running costs (c 7 per cent).

According to their website, the governors of the school aim to raise this from parents of children at the school, through direct debit contributions.

However, if the school converts to academy status, all ongoing costs will be met by the state and the school will be able to use its governors' fund for other purposes.

So, provided parents continue their voluntary contributions at the same level, the school will be significantly better off as an academy.

As others have pointed out, on conversion to academy status the school will also be allowed to keep its existing admissions policy; a policy that certainly would not have been established if they had been allowed as an academy from day one.

**JONATHAN SAWYER**  
Twickenham

Sir – This summer saw huge demonstrations in London and across the world protesting about the onslaught on Gaza.

Many local people joined these protests and wrote to MPs in the area urging that everything possible be done to resolve the situation.

On October 31, a small group of Twickenham residents went to express their continuing concerns to MP Vince Cable. We emphasised that while the public had shown outrage at the killing of civilians, the UK Government has taken no action beyond mild criticism of Israeli actions.

Some 20,000 tonnes of explosives were dropped by Israelis on the Gaza strip during the seven weeks of conflict. Not only were more than 2,000 people killed, including more than 500 children, but 18,000 families remain homeless as the winter approaches. Twenty-six schools have been completely destroyed and 122 schools damaged.

However, there have been no sanctions against Israel by the UK or the EU and the UK continues to sell weapons to Israel and collaborate with the Israeli arms industry in various ways.

And the blockade of Gaza remains in place making rebuilding nearly impossible.

We told Mr Cable that we felt the Government was way behind the public on this issue. We asked for action on trade sanctions, no further military engagement with Israel, and an end to the blockade of Gaza.

One immediate call for Government action is in our view straightforward.

Israel currently enjoys privileged access to European markets under the terms of the EU Israel trade agreement. This agreement is meant to be conditional upon Israel abiding by a commitment to uphold human rights. Given Israel's violation of the terms of the agreement we believe it should be suspended. Those who agree with us can add their voices by signing a petition to the Government at [act.palestinecampaign.org/petition/EUIsrael](http://act.palestinecampaign.org/petition/EUIsrael).

Yes the Middle East is a complex area where history is enormously important and there are many different peoples and interests needing to have their voices heard. However, at this time of remembrance as we look back on the suffering caused by war we are reminded that allowing powerful countries to act with impunity does not usually help the cause of peace.

**MARY HOLMES**  
Twickenham