

RISC SPEECH IN SUPPORT OF INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS PETITION – 13 Sep 2011

Madame Mayor

Our petition doesn't rule out new faith schools in the borough, even Catholic ones. Some of the petitioners support state-funded faith schools, others don't. But that's a national policy issue.

And everyone agrees we need good schools.

Our petition is simply about one issue: **inclusive admissions at new borough schools**. And that need not preclude faith schools: half the Anglican primaries in the country have inclusive admissions. And the Church of England is moving towards more inclusivity in its other schools as well.

In Richmond, there's already heavy competition for places at good secondary schools. And over the next 6 years, an additional two new school's worth of children will enter the secondary system.

The Council says that it has a plan. We expect it will include raising the quality of underperforming schools and providing additional capacity. But no-one knows how, when or if these aspirations will actually be delivered. The one sure thing is that it's acquired a site in Clifden Road, complete with a school building. **But instead of using it for a high quality inclusive school, it's offered it as a Catholic Voluntary Aided school - the least inclusive type of faith school available.**

In doing so, it's even gone against its own academies policy.

The usual set up for a VA school is that the church provides the premises, though in this case it seems the Council is doing that for them. The church then contributes 10% of the ongoing capital costs, while the taxpayer pays all the rest of the capital costs, and all the running costs. But the church controls the governing body, which sets the admissions policy. Catholic VA schools must always "*give priority to Catholic families.*" There's no distance limitation, so the proposed school will fill completely with children of Catholics from Richmond and other boroughs.

But 90% of the borough's children have parents who are non-religious, Anglican or belong to another faith. **They will all be discriminated against.**

The problem isn't really – as we've been told – that Richmond is one of two London boroughs without a Catholic secondary. There is no shortage of places at Catholic schools in the area. According to the Diocese of Westminster's website: "There are sufficient places in Catholic secondary schools in this diocese to accommodate every Catholic child." And there are 8 Catholic secondaries within 5 miles of the centre of the borough.

The real issue is that some of the 200 children a year who go from borough Catholic primaries to out of borough secondaries have awkward journeys to get to school. The plan is to "repatriate" these children to a Catholic secondary in Clifden Road. They will take all or most of the 150 places. So most of the places freed-up will be at out-of-borough Catholic secondaries, and **the new school will make little or no contribution to the overall capacity issue in Richmond.**

There is a better solution. We know that some Catholic parents would be happy with a good local community school if they could get their children in. But the Council's Linked Schools system excludes 5 of the 6 Catholic primaries, so their children are pushed to the back of the queue.

If the council provided sufficient capacity at good local inclusive schools and reformed the Linked Schools system, the needs of these Catholic parents would be met in a way that everyone would consider fair.

And all Catholic parents would still be able to send their children to one of the many Catholic secondaries nearby – a choice not available to anyone else.

We keep being told that the last Conservative election manifesto promised to "Work for a Catholic secondary school". It did. But it did not promise to: "Give top priority to a Catholic Voluntary Aided school ahead of the needs of everyone else." And it made an equally firm promise to "Consult before major decisions and take public views fully into account".

Unlike the campaign in favour of a Voluntary Aided Catholic school, we are not supported by a well-organised and powerful sectional interest. What you are hearing tonight is the voice of a large number of fair-minded people from right across the community, with beliefs ranging from the non-religious to Anglicans, Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Catholics, including parents and senior figures from borough schools.

Lord True once referred to those who oppose the council's plan as "naysayers". Well, this isn't a referendum, but by this evening, well over 1600 of them had signed the "Naysayers Petition".

The Council's choice is whether to listen to this powerful message and modify its plans, or simply to carry on. If it does that, there will be a lot of angry voters, and the underlying problem will not have gone away.

All we are asking is that the **council ensures that state-funded schools opening in the borough from now on – whoever is running them – have inclusive admissions policies, such that no child can be denied a place in a good local school simply because of the religion or belief of their parents.**

Jeremy Rodell
Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign