

# Top quality means high demand

Sir – With the start of the school year, primary places have understandably been in the spotlight.

Let me address three aspects: quality, capacity and fairness in admissions.

On quality, our primary schools again proved themselves the best in the country last year. Their results were fantastic, and I congratulate the staff and students for such a superb year (our secondaries did very well, too).

Our excellent team of council officers will continue to support our schools to further raise standards, and ensure excellence across the board.

On capacity, demand remains unquestionably high – due both to our schools’ outstanding quality, and a surge in the child population right

across London, as has been widely reported.

A 10-year plan for primary places was one of our administration’s top priorities in 2010 to get the situation back under control. While demand remains high, things have definitely improved.

With 18 permanent forms of reception entry being added during this administration, we have gone from needing seven “bulge” classes in 2009 to two this year.

That needs to come down to zero. This year, the percentage of families that got their first preference of school rose to 76 per cent, with 92 per cent getting one of their preferences. We are now in a much better position than other parts of London.

I fully appreciate that for the families that did not get

one of their preferences, the improvement is of small consolation. We are working hard to improve these figures further.

Finally, on fairness of admissions, ideally we would be able to perfectly flex the size of each school to meet demand. This unfortunately is neither physically possible nor legally allowed. Admissions criteria are therefore needed to allocate places, and I believe on the whole we do well in achieving fairness.

Faith schools control their own admissions, and the level of faith-based admissions varies by school. I know there are those who do not agree with faith schools or faith-based admissions.

I respect those views, as during the long debate on the new Catholic schools. But

there are also many who strongly support them. Locally, successive administrations of both parties have done so.

Nationally, all three major parties do, and current or recent leaders of each party have sent their children to faith schools.

I believe we have a reasonable balance of faith and non-faith-based places within Richmond.

For our community schools, we have an admissions forum that reviews the fairness of local arrangements and recommends changes where they feel they are needed.

There are alternatives to our distance-based criteria, but none that would provide an obviously fairer system.

We also have to ensure fairness in enforcing this system. As demand has intensified,

an issue that gets repeatedly raised with me is people temporarily moving close to a school to secure a place and then moving back out. When one family gains a place from this, another loses theirs.

It is difficult to police, but I have asked our officers to be vigilant in enforcing the rules, and ensuring everyone is treated fairly.

We can still make improvements to our school system in Richmond. We are working hard to make those improvements. But on the whole, I think we are doing well, and we are extremely fortunate in our borough to have a family of such excellent and popular schools.

**COUN PAUL HODGINS**  
Cabinet member for schools  
Richmond Council

1. Wonderful. But it makes it even more iniquitous that many children are excluded from some of the good schools because of their parents’ religious practices (both genuine and opportunistic).

2. Council report in May 2012: “There is not currently a need to establish a new primary school to ensure a sufficiency of places in Twickenham.”

Council has not yet initiated the formal process that would lead to a new primary anywhere in the borough.

3. Matthew Paul (Head of School Commissioning) said Council was not aiming to achieve the 5-10% margin of surplus places recommended, on the basis that the Council can’t afford it. But: a) new schools are paid for by central government, not the Council b) he claims that forecasting primary demand in Richmond is “more complex than in other boroughs” because of the large private sector. Surely that degree of uncertainty suggests a need for the upper end of the recommended margin, not for ignoring it.

5. The Council’s Admissions Forum: a) Has more representatives from faith schools and churches than from community schools. b) Meets to “review school admission arrangements within the borough and arrangements in surrounding areas which impacts on borough parents and children” - so it is not only restricted to consideration of borough community schools, but all the borough schools (including church schools) and relevant out-of-borough schools. c) Has no power to make changes.

4. As Cllr Hodgins knows, RISC’s argument is not against faith schools per se but against faith-based admissions. One of the major parties (LibDems) has a policy for greater inclusivity in admissions to faith schools. The Green Party is a formal supporter of the Fair Admissions Campaign. The Government’s Coalition Agreement states: “We will ensure that all new Academies follow an inclusive admissions policy... We will work with faith groups to enable more faith schools and facilitate inclusive admissions policies in as many of these schools as possible.”