

Sir,

S.Bennett (letter 14 Mar) says Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign is presenting an anti-religion campaign dressed up as a "fairness" issue. This is completely untrue. RISC has never had an anti-religious agenda. Personally, far from being anti-religious, I'm a strong believer in dialogue between people of different faiths and beliefs. RISC has a single focus: we think it is wrong for children to be denied access to local state-funded schools simply because of their parents' religious practices, and we want local church schools to follow the example of St.Mary's in Hampton, and become more inclusive.

One of the other fallacies in S.Bennett's letter is that faith based selection helps overcome unfairness associated with higher property prices near to good schools. In fact it only makes it worse. Far from providing for more children from less well-off households, both local and national data show clearly that selective church schools typically have fewer children eligible for free school meals - a standard measure of disadvantage - than community schools serving the same area.

Local faith schools have different over-subscription policies. Catholic schools are the most extreme. Among the CofE schools on the Twickenham side of the borough, St.Mary's & St.Peter's is notable because, in 2013, after offers to siblings, only 14 of the 90 places were offered to non-churchgoers with a cut-off distance of only 303m. This is despite Liz Wolverson, from the London Diocesan Board for Schools, stating: "We're not big fans of people filling churches on Sunday just so they can get their children into school...We feel that it is really important to go back to our roots...we should be there to serve the community, so we're really encouraging schools to move towards [open admissions]." In the light of that, we suggested SMSP at least put a reasonable cap on the degree of faith-based discrimination. The governors considered it but decided not to change.

It is also clear that S.Bennett does not appreciate the impact all this has on the majority of local parents, who are not churchgoers. Stanley School is indeed an excellent community school. But like other good local schools, it is over-subscribed. As Vince Cable has said: "we are getting into difficult - and nasty - competition for places. In a band from East Twickenham to Teddington there are now five faith schools (three CofE, two RC), and two non-denominational schools which are also bursting at the seams." In this situation, faith based admissions mean that some local parents have a privileged position in choosing and accessing nearby state-funded schools over their non churchgoing neighbours. The Council has a stated aim to provide places for primary age children within walking distance of their homes. Yet many parents are offered places that are far less accessible.

According to the OECD, we are one of only four developed countries to have faith-based selection at state funded schools - along with Estonia, Israel and Ireland. Although a special exemption in our equalities law allows it, individual church schools can decide whether to have more or less discriminatory admissions. Some, notably St.Mary's Hampton are, to quote Vince Cable, "more community minded in their admissions". Others, like SMSP seem determined to defend unfair privilege.

This is a straightforward ethical issue. It is time local church school governing bodies used their power to do the right thing.

Jeremy Rodell  
Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign