

Keeping faith with school policy

Sir – Parents who have applied for primary school places are now awaiting their offers.

Against a background of growing demand, we understand that the governing body of St Mary's and St Peter's Primary School in Teddington (SMSP) has

decided to retain its highly discriminatory faith-based admissions policy for 2015.

That is despite a diocesan policy to encourage greater inclusivity (especially at schools, like SMSP that have been recently expanded) and Vince Cable's call last year for local church schools to be

“more community minded” in their admissions.

SMSP is one of the few Anglican primaries in the borough with no upper limit to the number of places subject to faith-based priority.

Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign's 2013 report on primary schools

showed that only 14 of the 90 places at SMSP were offered to children who were neither siblings of existing pupils or new faith-based applicants.

Parents who are not churchgoers are, therefore, in the invidious position of sticking to their principles or pretending faith in order to

get into their local state-funded school. The majority of the SMSP governing body seem happy to ignore its own diocesan policy and keep it that way.

JEREMY RODELL
Richmond Inclusive
Schools Campaign

mission policy

Sir – Jeremy Rodell (Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign) in his letter (Keeping faith in school policy, February 14) reminds us yet again of the inequities that exist within our education system.

Despite a diocesan policy that is intended to encourage greater inclusivity within schools it would seem that certain Anglican primary schools continue their policy of religious exclusion.

One cannot wonder at the intelligence of such policies when some of the finest religious thinkers value the agnostic and atheist in their midst since it is they who have thought hard about the evidence of a god.

To quote Simone Weil: “Of two men who have no experience of god, he who denies him is perhaps nearer to him than the other.”

Why then refuse the children of these thinking people a place at a local school?

Surely our community will benefit if local schools make places available to local children, regardless of their parents’ religious practice.

Children who live near to each other and go to the same school, can play together and learn from each other; parents can share the school run and support each other. If successful at the forthcoming local elections I will do all in my power to encourage schools to open their gates to children of all faiths and of none.

**DR SUSAN
BURNINGHAM**
Twickenham Riverside
Liberal Democrat
candidates

seams

Sir – I note that the repine Jeremy Rodell from Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign (Keeping faith with school policy, February 14) is not just content with chastising the Catholics and the council over the creation of the St Richard Reynolds schools.

He is now antagonising the Anglicans over the admission policy for St Mary’s and St Peter’s CofE Primary School.

One can only speculate who will be next on his radar. Perhaps the wondrous Waldegrave School for Girls on the grounds it discriminates against boys?

A ROBERTS
Teddington

Access for all children

Sir – A Roberts (Schools bulging at the seams, February 28) makes a personal attack on Jeremy Rodell, rather than presenting a logical argument addressing the reasonable points he raised on behalf of Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign (Risc) about the failure of St Mary’s and St Peter’s Church of England Primary School to modify its discriminatory admissions policy, ignoring not only official advice from the Church of England but also the needs of local families.

Risc is focused on one issue: we want all the local state-funded schools to be equally accessible to all children, regardless of their parents’ beliefs.

That includes both Anglican and Catholic schools.

Many people do not realise that 100 per cent of the running costs and 90 per cent of the ongoing capital cost of all voluntary aided church schools are paid by the taxpayer.

Yet such schools set their own admissions policies and, in many cases (though not all), decide that these should be highly discriminatory and exclusive.

We think that these state-funded schools should be equally open to all local children.

A lot of local people agree with us, which is why a large and growing number of supporters have already signed up on the Risc website (richmondinclusive.schools.org.uk) or indicated support through Twitter and Facebook.

The number will only increase in the coming weeks as parents in the borough receive their offers of primary and secondary places for September 2014, and many among them discover that their children are unable to access their preferred local schools.

A number of parents will already have been discouraged from applying to their local (church) schools because they know they cannot meet the religious criteria – a kind of self-exclusion fostered by discriminatory admissions policies.

As we head towards the May local elections, we expect every candidate to make it clear whether or not they think it would benefit the community if local state-funded church schools made more of their places open to all local children, regardless of their parents’ religious practice.

Now is a good time to ask this important question.

HELEN CLARK
On behalf of Risc core
team

Non-religious schools not 'second best'

Sir – Schools, church or otherwise, use admissions policies when they are over-subscribed.

That is why the church school debate only exists in areas of high population density – it is not an issue in most parts of the country.

In the case of St Mary and St Peter, like other schools, in the event of oversubscription they prioritise children in care; children with a medical or social need; and siblings.

After that it is based on churchgoing and then proximity to the school gates.

In the case of excess demand for places at non-church schools, the same top three criteria apply and then it is based on who lives nearest.

By working the housing market, wealthier parents can buy a place at the school of their choice, distorting the property market for everyone.

If church schools ditched their admissions policies we could have a system entirely open to manipulation of the housing market.

Helen Clark says Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign (Risc) wants all local state-funded schools to be equally accessible to all children, regardless of their

parents' beliefs.

No school is "equally accessible to all" when it is over-subscribed.

When there are too many children for places, some form of admissions criteria has to be applied, be it postcode or pew.

Does she want atheists to send their children to church schools if it is their nearest school?

Or does she want atheists to have the choice of going to a further away school because of their beliefs?

And if so, does she want those non-church schools to change their admission criteria to accept children of atheists as a special category above closeness to school gates?

And to be properly inclusive, should not she add "parents' postcode" or "sex of child" to her "equally accessible" list?

It would seem Risc has not thought through the knock-on effects of this "policy".

If church schools ditch their requirement for religious practice (number four on the list) they would have the same admissions procedures as non-church schools, ie, proximity.

This could result in a church-going family being offered places at a

non-church school, and an atheist family being offered places at a church school.

Those families might get together and ask for a swap, and who could blame them?

That would be an administrative nightmare for the council, and the whole situation would be very silly indeed. The daftness would be endless and the education lawyers would have a field day.

If Teddington parents cannot get into St Mary and St Peter because they do not go to church, they can apply to Collis School, and Stanley School, both excellent with great facilities such as large playing fields (Collis), new buildings and swimming pool (Stanley).

They are not "second bests" and if you are not religious, would not you prefer to send your child to one of those schools?

A child can only attend one school, so every church school place equals one freed up elsewhere.

The taxpayer argument is quite spurious because the taxpayer funds a school system, not individual schools, and out of that system local authorities have to provide places for each child.

They do so with a combination of church and

non-church schools, which provides a little bit of choice and diversity to parents.

Helen Clark asserts that Jeremy Rodell is the victim of a "personal attack" by A Roberts, which is an interesting way to describe a good natured, light-hearted letter (February 28) that nonetheless makes a serious point.

This is not the first time that Risc and Jeremy Rodell have claimed victim status when anyone disagrees with them.

By presenting him as a victim she side-steps A Roberts' well-made point about the all girls Waldegrave School, the only truly non-inclusive state school in the borough, which Risc seems to have no trouble with. Only 30 per cent of the school population can even apply there, and there is no all boys equivalent.

By not including single-sex schools in its campaign, Risc cannot justify the word "inclusive" in its title. It should be called "Richmond anti-Church Schools Campaign".

Imagine a child with dual nationality because one parent is Australian and the other British; the child can have two passports.

But he/she can only live in

one country at a time.

To resent your neighbour's child for having two choices when you only have one is an affliction, not a virtue.

In a densely populated borough it is only natural that children from the same locale will go to several different schools, they all follow the national curriculum and are not that different.

Jeremy Rodell (February 14) ignores the fact that there is more than one "local school".

Richmond borough is not a remote rural backwater.

The idea that this represents a cruel separation of children as Susan Burningham (February 21) suggests is ludicrous.

I am also surprised Vince Cable as an economist does not see this issue as a supply and demand one. If church schools ditched their religious requirements, this would not increase the overall number of school places, which is the real problem.

If children cannot get into the local church school or the local non-church school, that is because there are too many children in that area for the schools to cope with and they are pushed further afield.

If Risc were true to its "inclusive" credentials it would

be campaigning for the expansion of popular over-subscribed church schools, with extra places being reserved for any child regardless of parents' beliefs.

Risc's proposals do not address the real problem.

But perhaps the real problem for Risc is the existence of church schools in the first place.

A growing population means demand for school places has increased. Instead of identifying this as a cause of friction over school places, Risc is pointing the finger at church schools which have been peacefully embedded in our history for 150 years or more.

Richmond people need to think very carefully about the aims of Risc.

When an organisation picks on one sector of the community and blames it for making life unfair for the rest, we are on very dodgy ground.

Risc is presenting an anti-religion campaign dressed up as a "fairness" issue.

They are trying to dupe people that church schools are a cause of unfairness and social ill.

They are not.

S BENNETT
Twickenham

'Not anti-religious but we want fairness'

Sir – S Bennett (Non-religious schools not second best, March 14) says Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign (Risc) 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 am 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 the 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 Church of England schools on the Twickenham side of the borough, St Mary’s and St Peter’s (SMSP) 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 Wolverston, 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 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
Twickenham

Sir – In his letter of March 14, S Bennett says “If church schools ditched their admissions policies we could have a system entirely open to manipulation of the housing market”. True.

But why is it better to have one open to manipulation from both the housing market and religious practice?

Surely that is a double whammy?

Not only are poor people excluded, but those who cannot make it along to church every week are excluded too.

There are many people of faith who do not go to church. Often it is the poorest, most chaotic families who are not able to make

that weekly commitment, but that does not mean they

do not want a religious education for their child.

The current system of attendance registers, and priests’ references supplementing school applications is, at best, coercion to increase church attendance and, at worst, deliberate exclusion of those who cannot or will not conform to a narrow “ideal” of religious practice.

The one point I do agree with Mr Bennett on is that non-religious schools are not “second best”.

However, nor are they “non-religious”.

Our community schools serve children from all religions and none, in a spirit of harmony.

If only our faith schools would do the same, they would lose their modern reputation for snobbery and exclusivity and return to their original purpose of serving their local communities.

E JOHNSON
Twickenham