

Gove backs voluntary cap on faith-based admissions in new Catholic school

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The Education Secretary Michael Gove has suggested that cap on faith-based admissions at a proposed new faith school in south west London would be "very sensible".

His comments follow controversial proposals by the London Borough of Richmond to open a Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Secondary School in Twickenham. Despite a growing shortage of good quality secondary school places in the borough, the church wants to give 90 per cent of the places to children from Catholic families and ensure that the other 10 per cent prioritises pupils who went to Catholic primaries.

The plans are being opposed by local Liberal Democrats who have said the site should not be used for the Catholic schools as they believe it will be needed for community provision.

Mr Gove's backing for a voluntary cap on faith based admissions at the school came in a letter to his Cabinet colleague, Vince Cable, in whose constituency the planned school would be located.

Mr Gove wrote to Mr Cable. "The proposals are for the (Catholic) school to be a voluntary-aided school. As you know, that means that the school will be able to admit pupils on grounds of faith, but the 50 per cent non-faith provision for the school's admissions [which applies to new free schools] will not apply. The suggestion that the school takes on a similar provision voluntarily seems very sensible to me, and I would welcome such a move."

Mr Gove's latest comments suggest a possible change of mind following his previous strong support for discriminatory faith based admissions policies. In 2011 Mr Gove said that despite "sometimes intense hostility from sections of secular opinion", the Catholic church had triumphed in a number of areas such as "the right to teach the Catholic religion" and "the rights over admission and staff appointments".

Voluntary aided schools can discriminate against all pupils on religious grounds if oversubscribed and can apply a religious test in appointing, remunerating and promoting all teachers. In addition, teachers can be disciplined or dismissed for conduct which is "incompatible with the precepts of the school's religion".

According to the [Times Educational Supplement](#), Mr Gove's comments are understood to have caused concern at the Catholic Education Service (CES), which has sought reassurances from government that there will not be a change in policy.

Stephen Evans, Campaigns Manager at the National Secular Society said: "Mr Gove's comments may be a step in the right direction, but if he really thinks faith based discrimination is undesirable he should change the law. It is simply wishful thinking to suggest the Catholic Church will voluntarily limit faith based admissions. The Borough is wrong to propose a new state-funded school that will turn away any local children because of the religion or belief of their parents while bringing in pupils from outside the borough to fill the places. Local Authorities exist to serve the local community, not the Catholic community."

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