

Catholic Church doesn't want to share its free schools with non-Catholics

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The Catholic Education Service (CES) has been told by the Education Secretary, Michael Gove, that it will not be permitted to exceed the number of places reserved for Catholic pupils at Catholic Free Schools beyond the 50% that is permitted at present.

In an interview with the *Catholic Herald*, Mr Gove said: "Remember, there's no reason why a new school with only 50 per cent Catholic students shouldn't have a wholly Catholic ethos. Of course, by definition, free schools are free to choose their own curriculum. Traditionally, Catholic schools have been concentrated in certain parts of the country. But Catholic parents who want a Catholic education for their children now have a way of providing it. Free schools are a way of increasing capacity, not limiting it."

The Catholic Education Service for England and Wales (CES) said that retaining a maximum quota on Catholic intake undermined parental choice.

Responding to Mr Gove's comments, a spokeswoman for the CES said: "Our chairman, Bishop Malcolm McMahon OP, said before the 2010 General Election that he was interested in the idea of free schools established by local communities but after the election the Coalition Agreement introduced the 50 per cent quota on places for Catholic pupils and this has proved problematic for our sector.

"The 50 per cent quota policy undermines the Government's own aim of increasing parental choice, since, in the case of an oversubscribed Catholic free school, Catholic pupils whose parents wanted to send them to a Catholic school would have to be turned away because they were Catholic."

The National Secular Society dismissed the Catholic Education Service statement as a "misleading and manipulative" attempt to pressure the Government into increasing the extent to which the Catholic Church is permitted to discriminate in state education. Stephen Evans, NSS Campaigns Manager said: "The idea that children of Catholic parents can be turned away from oversubscribed Catholic free schools because they are Catholic is simply not true. Once the 50% quota is reached they can still be considered under the school's other admissions criteria. When the 50% faith quota is filled, children of Catholic parents are simply treated the same as everybody else, rather than being privileged. The real injustice is that any discrimination at all is still permitted in our state funded schools."

In the interview, Mr Gove also praised the Pope, calling him "a wholly authentic figure". He also described the Catholic Church's role in education as "global and enduring".

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, added: "It is clear from this that the Catholic Church is now going to try to change the rules for free schools to its advantage. It is good that Michael Gove is sticking to his guns, but the Catholic Church does not give up easily and the pressure for full, unencumbered control of these state-paid-for schools, with a complete monopoly on places for Catholics, will continue."

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