

# Why is the Catholic church allowed to hinder secondary school choice?

Posted: Thu, 21st Oct 2021 by [Alastair Lichten](#)

*A case in Leicestershire shows the mess faith groups make of admissions and why secular accountability is necessary, argues Alastair Lichten.*

The practice of state funded faith schools [discriminating](#) in favour of prospective pupils on the basis of their parents' religion is well known. 'On your knees, avoid the fees' has become common parlance in conversations about religiously selective state schools. But the ways in which faith schools undermine families' choices can be more diverse, complex, and occasionally counterintuitive.

The problem of families being [pushed into a faith school](#), because of a lack of options or faith groups' influence over other education decisions, is less visible. A case in Leicestershire, now the subject of a [legal challenge](#), provides one such example.

Parents at [St Thomas More](#), a Catholic primary school in Leicester, claim the Catholic Diocese of Nottingham which runs the school is fostering discrimination by impeding a meaningful choice of secondary school. The diocese is blocking local non-faith (community-ethos) schools from listing St Thomas More as a feeder. This leaves parents at the school with almost no options but St Paul's Catholic School, a secondary school run by the diocese's trust.

Another community-ethos academy affected by the diocese's meddling is Beauchamp College. When they consulted on listing St Thomas More as a feeder, the diocese wrote to all parents, in a tone described as "intimidating", criticising support for the plan. In 2020, 45 St Thomas More parents called for the move, followed by 60% of consultation respondents. However, the diocese remained adamant that St Thomas More pupils are expected to transfer to St Paul's.

The head of the diocese's academy trust Neil Locker said neither they, nor the bishop, would allow any Catholic school to associate as a feeder with any non-Catholic school, because the relationship between primary and secondary schools "is fundamental and sacrosanct".

Another community ethos secondary school affected is Manor High School. When this school consulted local primary schools on its plans to update its feeder schools, St Thomas More's academy trust decided not to inform parents, in a possible breach of the School Admissions Code.

St Thomas More parents have been fighting for years to be given an equal choice of secondary schools. They describe the decision not to designate the school as a feeder for Manor High School as "a complete surprise and shock".

Frustrated by the diocese's influence over school choice, one parent is taking legal action with the Office of Schools Adjudicator (OSA), a body which helps to clarify the legal position on admissions policies, seeking to challenge the decision of the non-faith secondary schools not to list St Thomas More as a feeder.

The parent leading the legal action said: "I am doing this because many parents were unaware that they were being implicitly tied into a rigid sort of 'contract of Catholic faith education' that, effectively, means parents forgo their choice of non-Catholic secondary schools.

"This was not an informed decision for a substantial number of parents. Being locked into a consumer or employment contract with no exit strategy would never be accepted in any other area of society."

[NSS research shows](#) 260 pupils across Leicester and Leicestershire were assigned faith schools against parental preferences this year. Thirty-six per cent of pupils in the county have little choice but a faith-based primary, and the diocese's policy will leave many with little choice but a faith-based secondary school.

A representative of the Doyle Clayton legal firm supporting the case said, if successful, it "will help to ensure that children's secondary school choices are not restricted by the faith of their primary school and by a 'feeder school' system that funnels children into faith schools."

"By operating in this manner, the current system is limiting parents' choices of non-faith 'good' schools in their area, ultimately forcing a Catholic education onto children due to a lack of choice for their parents."

Designating a faith school, as a feeder to a community-ethos school is not straightforward. If this creates an advantage for the faith school pupils, it may [risk indirect discrimination](#). However, in this case all the other local primary schools have been listed by both Manor High School and Beauchamp College. Only St Thomas More is being treated differently, and only at the diocese's behest.

But whatever the arguments for or against specific feeder arrangements, they should not be a matter for the diocese to decide.

The case also raises questions about academisation, and the decreased role of local authorities in admissions. Our [research shows](#) that half of former community schools now in multi-academy trusts have some form of religious (normally C of E) governance. If faith-based academy trusts can insist on controlling the admissions of other schools as well as their own, many more families will be locked into faith-based education.

Everywhere you turn, faith schools' institutional and privileged role in admissions creates unnecessary hardship and complexity for parents. It leads to decisions being continually taken in the interests of faith bodies, with little or no genuine transparency or consultation. It's time we had an open, community-led and accountable admissions system, and seriously reevaluate the suitability of faith groups running public schools in an increasingly secular society.

The NSS will be following the case closely. If you have been affected by similar issues, please get in touch.

**If you would like to support parents' legal action, a [Crowd Justice fundraiser](#) for the legal action is aiming to raise £5,000 by 31 December.**

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Alastair (@AlastairLichten) is a former head of education at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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