

## State-backed faith schools a 'precious' right, says Archbishop



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Parents who choose a religious schooling for their children have a right to expect the state to support them, the most senior Roman Catholic cleric in England and Wales will insist today.

Politicians face 'test of civilisation' over elderly care, says Archbishop

The Archbishop of Westminster, the Most Rev Vincent Nichols, will issue an impassioned defence of faith schools after a high profile legal challenge to their admissions policies.

He will accuse opponents of church schools, led by secular and humanist campaign groups, of attempting to “sow division” in the community.

And he will describe a parent's choice to send their child to be educated in the faith which is “precious” to them as a human right.

The Archbishop's intervention comes as he officially opens two new Catholic schools in Richmond Upon Thames, west London, which were bitterly opposed by secular campaigners groups.

They waged a long campaign against the opening of St Richard Reynolds Catholic College – a primary and secondary school on the same site – which ended up at the High Court last year.

A judge rejected attempts by local parents and the British Humanist Association to challenge the opening the schools claiming that they discriminated against non-religious families while using public funds.

Lord True, the leader of Richmond council, accused the BHA of using children as a "play thing in their ideological campaign to stop church schools".

Local Catholic churches played a key role in a rival campaign, securing support for the schools.

In an address at the opening of the schools, named after monk who was martyred during the reign of

Henry VIII, the Archbishop will insist that Catholic schools play a vital role in building “social cohesion”.

“It has not been easy,” he will say.

“Some have wished to use this effort as an occasion to sow division.

“A Catholic school is a response to the proper and legitimate expectations that parents can look to the state to help them to educate their children in the faith and way of life which is precious to them.

“In this way a Catholic school contributes to social cohesion by respecting the rights of parents and by maintaining educational diversity.

“This parental right is enshrined in European Conventions [on Human Rights] and to be honoured wherever possible.”

Jeremy Rodell, leader of the Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign which brought the legal challenge, said: “Thousands of local people from all backgrounds, including some Catholics, strongly opposed this new school.

“That was not because it is a Catholic school, but because it has the most discriminatory type of admissions policy legally allowed, despite being state-funded.”

The case exposed deep seated divisions over the right of churchgoers to secure a coveted place in a religious school for their children.

Michael Gove, the education secretary, effectively limited the ability of churches to control admissions in new academies or free schools – the Government’s favoured schools programme – by imposing a cap on the number of places which they can reserve for churchgoers.

John Bingham - The Telegraph