

Roman Catholic Church says no new academies over cap on believers



Snub to Michael Gove as Roman Catholic Church rules out opening new academies unless the Government drops its cap on admissions

Officials have privately warned Michael Gove that the Church could be reluctant to expand under what it sees as the current restrictions *Photo: Eddie Mulholland for The Telegraph*

The Roman Catholic Church has ruled out opening any more new schools under the Coalition's favoured academies programme unless it drops a cap on the number of places which can be reserved for churchgoers' children.

In a snub to Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, the Catholic bishops of England and Wales issued a joint statement announcing that there would be no new schools set up under the current policy.

Britain is facing a growing shortage of school places because of a soaring birth rate and immigration.

Half of English local authorities are expected to have more pupils than places within the next two years and in some areas the shortfall could be as much as 20 per cent.

Churches are the biggest providers of education outside government itself with the Anglican and Catholic churches alone jointly providing almost two million places.

Under current Government policy all new schools should either be an academy or a free school, which have greater freedom from local authority interference over hiring and firing and teaching issues

But unlike traditional faith schools, which control their own admissions, in new academies and free schools the number of children from a particular faith background is capped at 50 per cent if they are oversubscribed.

The Catholic Church, whose schools are often heavily oversubscribed, has signalled that is willing to provide more places to meet the demand.

But officials see the cap as "perverse" – effectively forcing it to turn children from Catholic families away to meet a quota of non-Catholics.

Officials have privately warned Michael Gove that the Church could be reluctant to expand under what it sees as the current restrictions. But the joint statement, agreed after a four-day meeting of all serving Catholic bishops, represents a significant deterioration in relations over the issue.

It points out that since 1850 the Church has maintained an aim of providing education for every Catholic child adding: “The Bishops’ Conference takes the view that the imposition of a 50 per cent cap on the control of admissions is not a secure basis for the provision of a Catholic school and urges the dioceses to resist any pressure to establish a school on that basis.”

It goes on to make clear that education officials have been ordered to actively press ministers to drop the cap “so that it no longer places a disproportionate disadvantage on the Catholic community.”

The Archbishop of Westminster, the Most Rev Vincent Nichols, said: “We have great reservations about the upfront presentation of the policy on academies and that is a matter of regret for us.

“We believe that those Catholic academies that are established actually deliver a very good education and are among the best of the academies.”

There was confusion earlier this week over the Church of England’s stance after the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, spoke of a “move away” from faith-based entry criteria but then issued a statement insisting that he did not want a change to the system.

The Church of England already encourages its schools to limit the number of places for churchgoers.

Existing Catholic schools which converted to academy status are exempt from the cap.

Archbishop Nichols said: “Really what we want to explore much more with the Government is why cannot that success also be offered to a new academy without this 50 per cent cap on admissions.”

Archbishop Nichols also spoke about an “urgency to listen” to Catholics who do not live in accordance with Church teaching on issues such as contraception, divorce or homosexuality.

A spokesman for the Department for Education said: “Existing faith schools can choose to give priority to children of their own faith if they are oversubscribed. There are no plans to change that.

“We are clear however that all newly-created faith free schools and academies should only prioritise half their places according to faith if they are oversubscribed.

“This means that new faith schools established with taxpayers’ money in areas where there is a shortage of good places will be available to all who need them.”

John Bingham - The Telegraph