

DBE Services Guidance

Appendix Theological Basis and Rationale for Admissions to Church Schools

- The Dearing Report *The Way Ahead* : 'Church of England schools in the next millennium', describes the historical origins and purpose of CE schools in terms of service and nurture: providing an education for both Christian families and the local neighbourhood.
- The Report calls on church schools in the 21st century to remain true to this historic function, and recommends Diocesan Boards of Education to draw up a policy for admissions that will guide governors of aided schools in formulating their own admissions criteria.
- Attitudes to the concept of a faith school are intimately bound up with perceptions of who might be admitted to such a school. The hostility expressed in sections of the media and political circles is to some extent based on a view that all schools with a religious foundation are exclusive in their admissions and reinforce segregation in society on religious grounds.
- The drive for additional CE secondary schools needs to be set in the context of a clear policy for admissions that will identify whether such schools are intended for one faith community only, for all faiths or for anyone to attend. On 14 March 2006, the Archbishop of Canterbury asked the Church to find "some simple objective criteria, applicable across the country, for admissions; and, to avoid misunderstanding, some clear public commitment in the whole sector to guarantee places for local children and for children of other faith backgrounds".
- To this end, On 3 October 2006 the Bishop of Portsmouth wrote to the Secretary of State to say that new Church of England schools should make 25% of places available without test of faith.
- The Dearing Report, followed earlier reports (notably *The Fourth R* and *A Future in Partnership*) in identifying two purposes for church schools: nurture and service, both of which have been a clear part of Anglican practice since the first schools were founded.
- A primary reason for having schools has always been for the nurture of children from church families in the Christian faith. In the 19th century, the competition between the Church of England and the Free Churches was replicated in schools. Within the Church of England it was clear that, while for the most part, no formal allegiance to the Church of England was demanded at entry, all pupils were thoroughly exposed to Anglican influence and teaching whilst on roll. The weekly visits of the vicar to catechise the pupils and the regular services held in church are well attested to in logbooks and the reports of the National Society.
- Where there is an acknowledged Anglican family background there is still a duty of nurture on the church school, sharing with the family the bringing up of their children in the faith.
- For most schools, this would also hold true for children from other Christian families. Ecumenical hospitality extends to all mainstream Christian denominations, and in practice also to those outside formal ecumenical instruments. In an age when the survival of Christianity as a significant movement is daily threatened, there would have to be very good reasons for not recognising our common heritage with other Christians.
- For some primary and some secondary schools within the dioceses, the very considerable number of applications for places means that the school could fill its places with children from practising Christian families. Indeed, in some schools the level of over-subscription is so high that applicants have to have been regular church attenders for some considerable time. In these circumstances, governors have the difficult task of framing an admissions policy that allows them to discriminate between applications. In most of these cases, governors have decided that their first obligation is to nurture those already of the Christian faith, even in some cases only those belonging to the Anglican church. There are accordingly a very few schools that take only Christian pupils.

- This response from governors is understandable. Indeed governors are under very heavy pressure and feel keenly the responsibility not to disappoint the many families who seek places. In some cases this response is presented as more than just a practical response to a practical difficulty; the school would see its function as exclusively meeting the need of Christian families for a school providing Christian nurture.
- The historic position of the Church of England, however, has been to see its schools as both nurture and service. The five Dioceses that form DBE Services maintain a commitment to that dual focus and believe that their schools are both for committed Christian families and to meet the needs of the local community. We therefore accept the principle expressed by the Bishop of Portsmouth, of allocating a proportion of places available in our schools to pupils of other faiths and of none.
- This is the service function of church schools. Service is represented in doing those things Christ would do, to bring about his kingdom of justice, peace and love. Providing for his little ones, so that they might live life in all its abundance was, and still is, the reason why the church is institutionally involved in the provision of education. Education with an eternal dimension is the gift of the church to contemporary society and it is available to all.
- Church of England schools were founded under the explicit auspices of the Church as a clear expression of Christian service and witness. As such, they share in and are major agents for the mission of the church. They are a means whereby those with no formal contact with the church, (and in some cases that may be for two or three generations), may encounter the Christian gospel and the Christian community. The church school allows children, and their families, to draw on the Christian and Anglican heritage in their own spiritual development, through an exposure to Christian faith and life, worship and values.
- Christian witness is carried out in the telling of the Christian story, through RE and worship; through keeping the festivals of the church; through linking ideas of right and wrong to Christian ethics; and is present in the assumption that part of the educational process is exploration of Christian beliefs, not as an intellectual exercise, but as a potential path for all to tread.
- Church schools therefore have a clear obligation to enable those with little or no contact with the Christian faith access to places. The clear logic of mission is to take the Gospel to the places where it has not been heard, and schools are in a position of privilege not matched in any other area of the Church's ministry.

'Distinctive and inclusive'

- The Dearing Report distinguishes CE schools from other models of 'faith school' with reference to their origin in service to the whole community. The impetus behind the establishment of Roman Catholic and, later, Jewish and Muslim schools was different. The stated aim of the Catholic education service was to provide for baptised Catholics to be educated within a Catholic context from start to finish. Establishing and reinforcing faith identity was, and still is, a crucial component of the system. That aspect is also clearly evident in Jewish schools with religious teaching designed to nurture children in their faith. This nurture model is also characteristic of Muslim schools.
- By contrast CE primary schools at least see themselves as serving the community within which they are set. As the Church of England itself is uniquely there for the whole community, whatever their commitment, so the CE school is available for all those who choose to come. In this respect the school's 'catchment area' is parallel to the idea of the parish. Where the school accepts pupils from the local neighbourhood there must be a clear sense of distinctiveness, so that the mission functions are being discharged. To this extent new the Admissions Code of Practice is likely to strengthen schools links with their local communities by the allocation of places to those from other faiths and none and by the increased use of geographical proximity to allocate places in circumstances where schools remain oversubscribed after the criteria have been applied.
- Hospitality to other faith traditions is a long-standing feature of the role of CE schools in many parts of UK. This does not detract from or compromise the mission function of the church school. It is acceptable to represent the Christian community to other religious communities. Church schools start from a position of respect for faith, and the recognition that spiritual growth is the heart of all growth.

They acknowledge the importance of nurture for all faith traditions and the contribution that learning from those of other faiths makes to our own religious development. The continued confidence families from other faith traditions place in Church of England schools, albeit as a second best in some (though by no means all) cases to having schools with an Islamic foundation, signals the careful way in which church schools have sought to be true to both the Christian foundation and the needs of their families.

- The Dearing Report discusses whether there are limits to the numbers from other traditions that might be admitted while still preserving Christian distinctiveness: (Dearing 4.47) 'In any new primary and secondary schools it should be the policy to establish within measurable time – if it is not possible from the outset – at least a substantial minority of pupils with a Christian background'
- The Report suggests a mechanism for distinguishing places available for church families from those available for other applicants. It suggests that a specified proportion of places are designated 'Foundation' places for church applicants and the rest 'Open' places for other applicants. Open places may be allocated with reference to a variety of criteria e.g. residence, faith background, medical or social need or other locally relevant criteria. The AdmissionsCode, (2007), says that, 'Admission authorities for faith schools should consider how their particular admission arrangements impact on the communities in which they are physically based and those faith communities they serve.' Faith schools can contribute to community cohesion by having admission arrangements that are inclusive or other faiths and of all elements of the population of their local area. Some faith schools already achieve inclusiveness by designating a proportion of places for which children of their own faith or denomination will be given priority, and the remainder as community or open places for which local children will be given priority.
'In particular, the aim over time in new voluntary aided schools should be to achieve an appropriate balance of 'open' and 'foundation' places, sufficient to ensure that the school is a distinctively Christian institution whilst remaining grounded in the local community in all its diversity.' Dearing 4.47

Further Theological Considerations

The Church school as a model of the Church:

The church school stands not only as the church's gift, but also as an integral part of that church. One way of looking at it is as a threshold, which is part of the building without being the whole of the building. It can function as a route into the Church, a means of entry. In it people see reflected and enacted the characteristics of the people of God and are drawn into the fellowship.

One useful checklist for assessing whether a church school is living up to its vocation is based on the Notes (or Marks) of the Church. As the whole church is called to be One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, so is the church school. This can happen if the school truly shares in the marks of the church: One, holy, catholic and apostolic.

Being One:

Is the school truly a local manifestation of the universal Church, sharing and showing its characteristics? Is there, among richly varied styles of being and action among church schools, a perceptible deep unity with other such local manifestations? Is there a core of common beliefs, common values, and a sharing around word and sacrament in worship?

It may be that the school can demonstrate unity more readily than the Church. All schools have to take account of an externally imposed framework; the National curriculum and Ofsted, SATs and GCSEs. The outcomes and expectations operate across all schools. In addition, church schools can claim common values explicitly owning Christian inspiration. The majority does function as a united community regardless of the origins of the pupils. Belonging to the school creates the unity and identity that enables pupils and staff to see themselves as a community.

Being Holy:

Is the school truly driven by the things of God? Does it seek always to find Christ and the Holy Spirit in the world and to mirror Christ in its action and being? Does it, for instance, seek to express servanthood without subservience? Has it opted to transform and heal rather than acquiesce and

ignore? Can it see the pain and redemptive power of crucifixion, and can it witness to the hope of resurrection?

The school already exists to serve others, seeking the enabling and empowerment of those who attend. Education's primary function is transformation and autonomy; founded on an explicit commitment to the well being of others, holding out a vision of wholeness that underpins its daily life and work.

Being Catholic:

Is the school genuinely striving to express the Church's vocation to be for all? Is it, in the first place, in some measure ecumenically inclusive of different expressions of Christianity? Is it a place of dialogue between cultures and identities, and a bridge builder in its community? Is universal humanity and inter-relatedness acknowledged and celebrated?

The school can hold up to the church a model of what this means. Most schools include all those who want to come, and seek to create communities of hospitality and welcome. In its members and through the curriculum, the school offers the opportunity to explore the breadth and richness of human living, and to equip pupils to be creative members of a rainbow world. At the same time the church school does this with an explicit commitment to Christian values. The school is living out the tensions of that dual commitment, which most churches have not begun to acknowledge.

Being Apostolic:

Is the school conscious that it stands in the tradition of Christian proclamation, mission and ministry? Is it truly able to see beyond the past to co-operate with God's purposes for the future? Is it open to offering the things of God to children and adults who have hardly begun to know God exists, as well as those within the community of faith?

Whether consciously or not, the school is clearly continuing the preaching and teaching ministry through RE and worship. Children in church schools have far more opportunities to engage with Christian teaching than most committed adults. The worshipping life of the school is imprinted by the Christian calendar, the festivals and rhythms in a way that many parish churches are unable to do. It is in school that the sacramental life of the Church is being reshaped to enable it to speak to the communities of children and unconnected adults.

Schools are living theology for the Church: theology in the real world across cultures and faiths

Another possible checklist is based on the Five Marks of Mission (Lambeth 1988 and ACC following):

- Is the school proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God?
- Is the school playing its part in teaching, baptising and nurturing new believers?
- Is the school responding to human need by loving service?
- Is the school, with others of goodwill, seeking to transform the unjust structures of society?
- Is the school striving to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth?

Finally, the school must share in the bias to the poor demanded of Christ's followers. The life of Jesus constantly demonstrates movement across boundaries of class, race, respectability, disability, gender and wealth to show his identification with the poor. His teaching and experience demonstrated a constant concern for the marginalised and excluded, both as those for whom the Kingdom would be established and also as those by whom the Kingdom would be brought in. For us, as for him, the poor are all those who we would exclude, for whatever reason, whose voices are not heard, who have no access to the goods of this world.