

10 August 2020

Dear Mr Prince,

I am writing to express Humanists UK's support for the scrutiny panel that has recently been established by the Council's Education and Children's Services Select Committee to examine the effect of religiously selective school admissions policies on religious and ethnic minorities in Liverpool. I would also like to take this opportunity to highlight research we have done into the ways in which current Liverpool admissions rules disadvantage families from a variety of backgrounds, including the non-religious, and to suggest some ways these issues might be addressed.

For your information, Humanists UK is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people. Founded in 1896 and today powered by over 85,000 members and supporters, we advance free thinking and promote humanism to create a tolerant society where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We have a long history of work in education, children's rights, and equality, with expertise in the 'religion or belief' strand and have been involved in policy development around the school and the curriculum for over 60 years. In Liverpool we operate through our branch group, Liverpool Humanists, which has 1,200 members and supporters.

The problem with religious selection

School admissions have long been a particular area of our education work, with a specific focus on the religious selection criteria employed by a significant number of state schools, including many in Liverpool. As the testimony of the Muslim parents from Princes Park who prompted the decision to establish the scrutiny panel demonstrates, this form of discrimination has a very clear impact. This impact is not only on the ability of parents to send their children to local schools, but also on efforts to build tolerance and mutual respect between different religious and non-religious groups. Indeed, there is a great deal of robust evidence to show that religious selection not only segregates pupils by religion, but along ethnic and socio-economic lines, as well as by prior attainment.¹ And, as studies that control for pupil background show,² it is this (rather than a faith ethos) that actually accounts for any enhanced levels of attainment or performance in league tables.

Faith schools are socially selective, because their religious admissions policies enable them

¹ For an overview see <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/research/> and <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/2017-08-29-FINAL-Religious-Selection-Research-Survey.pdf>.

² See <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/faith-schools-pupil-performance-social-selecti> on/or <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp228.pdf> or <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/01/24/secondary-league-tables-unfairly-benefit-religious-schools-by-ignoring-pupil-backgrounds-say-academics/>.

to skim the richest, most advantaged pupils from their areas while the rest fail to meet their more complex admissions criteria.³ Evidence from the Fair Admissions Campaign shows that, overall, comprehensive secondaries with no religious character admit 5% more pupils eligible for free school meals than live in their local areas. But comprehensive Church of England secondaries admit 15% fewer; Roman Catholic secondaries 28% fewer; Jewish secondaries 63% fewer; and Muslim secondaries 29% fewer.⁴

Similarly religious admissions policies also segregate along ethnic lines. For example, overall, Catholic schools take 4.4 percentage points fewer Asian pupils than would be expected given their local areas. And all this is to say nothing of the religious segregation that is inherent to the exercise, which significantly disadvantages families who do not share the faith of their local school, be they of a different faith or non-religious. In fact, research conducted by Humanists UK found that 40% of all state faith secondary schools in England discriminate against non-religious families specifically by giving priority to families who are of any religion over the non-religious. This figure rises to 60% for Catholic secondaries.

The situation in Liverpool

A large proportion of schools in Liverpool have a religious character and select most or all of their pupils by faith background, effectively shutting local families out of these local schools altogether. In some postcodes, the majority of the closest secondary schools have a religious character, forcing pupils to apply further afield. This is a problem since distance is usually the key criterion for admission in schools without a religious character. In many cases, religious selection means that minority faith or non-religious parents have no real school choice at all.

For example, our research shows that to secure a school rated good or higher in the L12 4YE postcode in West Derby, the parents of a boy moving into Year 7 would be forced either to apply for a school with a religious ethos they don't share (and, in all but one case, are unlikely to be allocated a place at), or accept a place at a school without a religious character that is rated inadequate or requires improvement by Ofsted. And, in the L7 2QH area of Kensington and Fairfield, parents of a boy wanting a school without a religious character would have had access to just one good school that was undersubscribed last year and is the 13th furthest away from their home.⁵

The scrutiny panel investigation and further actions

With all this in mind, we believe that a proper inquiry into the impact of faith-based admissions must consider how these policies discriminate against and disadvantage a range of different groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, the non-religious, and the socioeconomically deprived. On this basis, we urge the scrutiny panel to fully acknowledge the wealth of evidence that shows that religious selection is detrimental to the interests of large numbers of Liverpool residents, and commit to doing all it can to ensure that schools in the city are diverse, inclusive, and open to all.

³ A recent study by researchers at the University of Lancaster found that 'minority ethnic families are 17% less likely to achieve their first choice school' (see Ian Walker and Matthew Weldon (2020), 'School choice, admission, and equity of access: Comparing the relative access to good schools in England', p.6 https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/media/lancaster-university/content-assets/documents/lums/economics/working-papers/LancasterWP2020_011.pdf).

⁴ See <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Overview-of-issues-to-do-with-religious-selection-in-school-admissions.pdf>.

⁵ See attached annex for details.

At the council level, this should include:

- 1. Actively encouraging bids for inclusive schools over ones that intend to make use of religiously selective admissions;**
- 2. Issuing a public statement of support for inclusive, diverse admissions;**
- 3. When further places are needed in existing schools, supporting the expansion of schools with open admissions and not of schools with religiously selective admissions.**

Steps like these make school admissions fairer for families from an array of different backgrounds. Further, because learning together in diverse groups has been shown to improve attitudes to others as well as levels intercommunal trust,⁶ they will also help bring communities together. This will make Liverpool a more socially cohesive and tolerant city which, as I am sure you will agree, will be of benefit to all.

I would very much like to discuss these matters further with you and the other members of the panel, and would welcome the opportunity to meet (virtually, of course) to discuss this further.

Best wishes,



Ruth Wareham

Education Campaigns Manager, Humanists UK

⁶ See Miles Hewstone et al. (2017) 'Diversity and Social Cohesion in Mixed and Segregated Secondary Schools in Oldham' https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/634118/Diversity_and_Social_Cohesion_in_Oldham_schools.pdf and Miles Hewstone et al. (2018) 'Influence of segregation versus mixing: Intergroup contact and attitudes among White-British and Asian-British students in high schools in Oldham, England' *Theory and Research in Education*, Volume: 16 issue: 2, pp 179-203 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1477878518779879> .

Postcode profiles for school admissions in Liverpool

To assess the potential impact of religiously selective admissions on families who do not share the faith of their local schools, we profiled two postcodes in the Liverpool area where faith schools are particularly prevalent.¹ We looked at all the secondary schools within three miles of each postcode as this is statutory walking distance for secondary age pupils.²

Table 1 shows that, in the first postcode (covering Deysbrook Lane in the West Derby area of the city), four of the five closest schools are faith schools and, within the three-mile distance, seven of the 13 closest schools have a religious character. Owing to the larger number of girls' schools in this area, the parents of a boy seeking a Year 7 place would be forced to apply for a school with a religious ethos they don't share (and, in all but the case of The Academy of St Francis of Assisi, are unlikely to be allocated a place at), or accept a place at a school without a religious character that is rated inadequate or requires improvement by Ofsted.

The second postcode, shown in Table 2, covers Wedgewood Street in the Kensington and Fairfield area. Here, the parents of a boy wanting a school without a religious character would have access to just one good school that was undersubscribed last year and, at more than two miles away as the crow flies, is the 13th furthest away from their home. It is possible this child could get a place at North Liverpool Academy. However, the system of random allocation for places at this school means that this is not a given and will depend on a number of factors, including what attainment band he is in.

Since demand for places can vary from year to year, catchment areas are subject to change and it is often difficult for parents to work out how likely they are to be able to secure a particular school place for their child. By further restricting the schools available to non-religious and minority religious families, it is clear that religiously selective admissions further complicate this picture, making the system both unfair and difficult to navigate. This is particularly problematic for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may be less aware of which schools they stand a chance of getting into and, as a result, may end up being allocated a place in a school they did not specify (as was the case for a large number of pupils admitted to five of the schools in the areas we looked at).

¹ To identify these areas, we used a combination of the Fair Admissions Campaign Map (<https://fairadmissions.org.uk/map/>) and, to ensure no newer schools were missed from the analysis, Liverpool Council's own school search page (<https://liverpool.gov.uk/schools-and-learning/school-admission/s/school-search/>).

² DfE, Home to school travel and transport guidance: Statutory guidance for local authorities (2014) Section 1.3 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575323/Home_to_school_travel_and_transport_guidance.pdf.

Annex 1

For this reason, one of the best ways to improve the admissions system both in Liverpool (and the rest of the country) would be to remove, or at the very least minimise, religious selection. Although this would not eliminate competition for places in good or outstanding schools, it would mean that no family could be denied a place purely on the basis of their religion or belief and that the other forms of segregation the practice has been found to exacerbate (e.g. by ethnicity or socioeconomic status)³ would be greatly reduced.

Table 1:

Address	School Name	Distance	Denom.	Sex	Religiously selective?	No of places available last year	No of places allocated last year	No of applications ⁴	Oversubscribed 2019? ⁵	Ofsted rating
Deysbrook Lane, L12 4YE	Broughton Hall Catholic High School	0.63 miles	Roman Catholic	Girls	Yes	210	210	483	No	Requires Improvement (May 2019)
	Cardinal Heenan Catholic High school	0.69 miles	Roman Catholic	Boys	Yes	240	240	494	No	Requires Improvement (March 2018)
	Holly Lodge Girls' College	1.1 miles	No religious character	Girls	No	180	163 (undersubscribed with 29 places awarded to those who did not specify the school).	258	No	Good (November 2019)
	St Edwards College	0.9 miles	Roman Catholic	Mixed	Yes	170	170	1092	Yes	Outstanding (2009 - prior to conversion to academy status)
	The De La Salle Academy	1.11 miles	Roman Catholic	Boys	Yes	120	81 (undersubscribed with 27 places awarded to those who did not specify the school).	93	No	Inadequate (January 2020)
	West Derby School	1.39 miles	No religious character	Boys	No	180	180	466	Yes	Requires Improvement (September 2019)

³ For an overview of this research see <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/research/> and <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/2017-08-29-FINAL-Religious-Selection-Research-Survey.pdf>.

⁴ Top 5 preferences last year

⁵ According to Telegraph data based on 1st preference only: <https://bit.ly/3fDA3kR>

Annex 1

	St John Bosco Arts College	1.40 miles	Roman Catholic	Girls	Yes	180	180	354	No	Good (November 2016)
	Broadgreen International School	1.53 miles	No religious character	Mixed	No	210	207	316	No	Inadequate (December 2018)
	The Academy of St Francis of Assisi	2.28 miles	Other Christian	Mixed	Yes	180	179	211	No	Good (December 2018)
	Childwall Sports & Science Academy	2.44 miles	No religious character	Mixed	No	190	185 (undersubscribed with 22 places awarded to those who did not specify school)	412	No	Requires Improvement (June 2018)
	King David High School	2.57 miles	Jewish	Mixed	Yes	110	110	741	Yes	Outstanding (June 2010)
	Fazakerley High School	2.78 miles	No religious character	Mixed	No	180	176 (undersubscribed with 45 places awarded to those who did not specify school)	281	No	Inadequate (October 2019)
	Alsop High School Technology & Applied Learning Specialist College	2.87 miles	No religious character	Mixed	No	280	280	522	Yes	Inadequate (May 2019)

Table 2:

Address	School Name	Distance	Denom.	Sex	Religiously selective?	No of places available last year	No of places allocated last year	No of applications ⁶	Oversubscribed 2019? ⁷	Ofsted rating
Wedgewood Street, L7 2QH	The Academy of St Francis of Assisi	0.62 miles	Other Christian	Mixed	Yes	180	179	211	No	Good (December 2018)
	Archbishop Blanch	0.75	C of E	Girls	Yes	180	180	591	Yes	Good (June 2015)

⁶ Top 5 preferences last year

⁷ According to Telegraph data based on 1st preference only: <https://bit.ly/3fDA3kR>

Annex 1

Church of England High School	miles									
North Liverpool Academy	1.33 miles	No religious character	Mixed	No (uses random allocation)	230	230	384	No	Good (May 2017)	
St Hilda's Church of England High School	1.47 miles	C of E	Mixed	Yes	170	170	1272	Yes	Good (April 2012)	
Bellerive FCJ Catholic College	1.50 miles	Roman Catholic	Girls	Yes	160	160	476	No	Good (June 2012)	
West Derby School	1.50 miles	No religious character	Boys	No	180	180	466	Yes	Requires Improvement (September 2019)	
The Belvedere Academy	1.66 miles	No religious character	Girls	No	155	155	879	Yes	Outstanding (February 2015)	
Notre Dame Catholic College	1.67 miles	Roman Catholic	Mixed	Yes	180	180	466	Yes	Requires Improvement (January 2019)	
Holly Lodge Girls' College	1.86 miles	No religious character	Girls	No	180	163 (undersubscribed with 29 places awarded to those who did not specify the school).	258	No	Good (November 2019)	
Broadgreen International School	1.92 miles	No religious character	Mixed	No	210	207	316	No	Inadequate (December 2018)	
St Edwards College	1.96 miles	Roman Catholic	Mixed	Yes	170	170	1092	Yes	Outstanding (2009 - prior to conversion to academy status)	
King David High School	2.07 miles	Jewish	Mixed	Yes	110	110	741	Yes	Outstanding (June 2010)	
King's Leadership Academy Liverpool	2.10 miles	No religious character	Mixed	No	160	159 (undersubscribed with 93 places awarded to those who did not specify school)	102	No	Good (May 2018)	

Annex 1

	Liverpool College	2.11 miles	C of E	Mixed	No (uses random allocation)	145	145	1417	Yes	Outstanding (November 2019)
	Childwall Sports & Science Academy	2.26 miles	No religious character	Mixed	No	190	185 (undersubscribed with 22 places awarded to those who did not specify school)	412	No	Requires Improvement (June 2018)
	Alsop High School Technology & Applied Learning Specialist College	2.64 miles	No religious character	Mixed	No	280	280	522	Yes	Inadequate (May 2019)
	Cardinal Heenan Catholic High school	2.65 miles	Roman Catholic	Boys	Yes	240	240	494	No	Requires Improvement (March 2018)
	Calderstones School	2.66 miles	No religious character	Mixed	No	265	265	828 (last child admitted in the last admission intake lived 2.022 miles from school).	Yes	Requires Improvement (May 2019)
	Broughton Hall Catholic High School	2.70 miles	Roman Catholic	Girls	Yes	210	210	483	No	Requires Improvement (May 2019)
	St Margaret's Church of England Academy	2.89 miles	C of E	Boys	Yes	180	180	581	Same number of applications and places	Good (May 2015)