

His Grace the Archbishop of Westminster,
Archbishop's House,
Ambrosden Avenue,
London SW1P 1QJ

12th December 2010

Dear Archbishop Nichols,

You may recall that up to September of last year I was chairman of the governing body of the Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School. Just before I was retrospectively deselected I twice requested a meeting with you in order to see if there was any way of averting what I then perceived to be a likely clash between the school and the diocese of potentially serious proportions. I regret that you chose to refuse my request not least because my then fears have been more than fully vindicated.

I had hoped that at the time the diocese would have given me the credit of acknowledging that I was not exactly new to education when I was first appointed to the Vaughan. I had already served on the Education Committee of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea for ten years, three years as Vice Chairman and a further three as Chairman. This brought me into intimate contact with the 36 borough schools, 10 of which are Catholic. I had also served for ten years as Chief Whip in which role one of my responsibilities was recruiting and appointing governors to all these schools. So I can claim to know something about how an Education Department should operate. I regret to have to tell you from my first introduction to it I do not judge the diocesan education department to have provided a good service to Catholic education. Incidentally, and slightly to my surprise, your own current representative on the Vaughan governing body, Monsignor Curry, volunteered to me some eighteen months ago that he had formed a similar judgment.

From September of this year I have been persuaded to return to the Vaughan as the LEA appointment. I am frankly horrified at what appears to have happened in the year I have been absent. The deselection of a second batch of foundation governors, in an identical manner to the first batch with lack of courtesy and basic pastoral care, is particularly shocking. Even at this late stage it is a matter that should be rectified. Then the referral of the school by the diocese to the adjudicator over admissions (see St. Paul's views on this type of behaviour – 1 Corinthians ch 6 v 1-8) caused huge resentment leading to a successful legal challenge. Continuing pressure on governors to "toe the party line" to the possible exclusion of the fulfilment of their fiduciary duties is causing further anguish.

I come now to your 8th December letter to parents of which I have had a sight. I regret to say there was nothing “unified” about the first meeting of the governing body of the school year which took place last week. You state that it is not the case that the school’s tradition of musical excellence is under threat. I am afraid one of your foundation governors certainly brought that assurance into question in the context of debate about the qualities sought in a new head teacher. You draw the attention of the parents to a number of documents which lay out the vision and strategy of Catholic education. The Trust Deed, which is not included in the list, refers to Canon Law. And Canon Law is absolutely clear that “Catholic parents have also the duty and the right to choose those means and institutes which, in their local circumstances, can best promote the Catholic education of their children. *Parents must have a real freedom in their choice of schools*” (my italics). Forgive me, but I find this statement impossible to reconcile with the stipulation of your Director of Education (now a governor of the school) that schools should work “with each other and the local diocese to ensure that the available places are distributed equitably”.

This brings me to the final point I wish to make and it is possibly one which neither foundation governors, parents nor staff may feel bold enough to put before you. It is, however, a theme which was touched upon by the school chaplain at the 23rd September Mass in the Cathedral. You speak in your letter of the ethos of the school and of its strong Catholic character. From my personal observation and experience over ten years I venture to go a step further and say to you that this is a school that has as its main aim the sanctification of all of its pupils, all of its staff and even of all of its governors. Whether they would express this in quite the words I have used I believe members of the wider Vaughan family are very conscious of this aim and they are also conscious of the open and transparent nature of the school’s journey towards the achievement of that aim. It is basically this “pearl of great price” that the parents of the school are fighting for and it is also my main motivation for rejoining the governing body.

You must forgive me if you find this letter too blunt for your taste. If our deferred meeting would serve any purpose I am at your disposal.

Yours Sincerely,

Sir Adrian FitzGerald