

Summary Response to Bishop Stack

The Vaughan Parents' Action Group notes that parents, who have written to the Archbishop of Westminster to voice their concerns about diocesan actions in relation to the School's Governing Body, have finally received a reply from Bishop Stack, the auxiliary bishop to whom responsibility for educational matters in the Diocese is delegated. While the VPAG welcomes this development, it regrets that it has taken nearly two months and "almost 80 letters" to elicit a generic response that not only fails to address all of the points individual parents have raised, but even fails to acknowledge that it is parents to whom he is responding.

Appended to Bishop Stack's letter is "a list of common points which have been made in the correspondence he [the Archbishop] has received". This list answers questions that have not been asked, leaves unanswered questions that have been asked and risks misleading not only parents, but the wider public.

- No one disputes the right of the Bishop to appoint the majority of governors in a Catholic school; this is a straw man argument. It is the contention of the Parent Governors, supported by VPAG, that he is bound to do so in accordance with the 2007 Statutory Instrument applicable to all governing body appointments, not only those in Catholic schools. The Parent Governors contend that he has not done so; the Bishop argues that he has. This is a matter for the Appeal Court to decide.
- In response to the question "Is the Bishop obliged to appoint parents of current pupils as Foundation Governors?", the Bishop replies simply "No." No mention of pending legal proceedings is made in the diocesan document, and the fact that issues relating to the governance of the School are currently the subject of investigation by the Department for Education is ignored.
- The statement that "...the Bishop has not refused to appoint Foundation Governors who are parents of current pupils of the school" is misleading. A number of parents of current pupils, some of whom are experienced Foundation Governors in other diocesan schools, made their availability known to the Diocese; some had already been vetted for suitability. The Bishop chose other governors with no connection with the School. The difference between that decision and a refusal is purely semantic.
- In this document, the Diocese at last acknowledges the Church's teaching that parents are the "primary educators of their children", conceding their role as "...important partners in the schools provided by the Church to assist them in this duty". In its actions, the Diocese seems to see parents as very much the junior partners in the educational enterprise. This seems an extraordinary interpretation of the Church's teaching; either parents are "primary educators" or they are not.

- The Diocese claims that “the vast majority of Catholic schools in the Diocese are... heavily oversubscribed”. This suggests that admissions criteria based on the applicants’ place of residence will result in Catholics who live in those parts of the Diocese where there is no Catholic secondary school being offered either no place, or a place no one else wants.
- The decision of the Schools Adjudicator, on the referral brought by the Diocese, accorded to the Diocese “enhanced status” as a consultee, requiring the School to show very good reasons for departing from diocesan guidance. In the Adjudicator’s opinion, the School’s desire to maintain its historic pan-London intake was not a good enough reason. In reaching this determination, the Adjudicator noted, “the philosophy of the diocese (and indeed the Catholic Church itself) is actively to encourage the participation of all baptised Catholic children such that the beneficial ethos of its schools can draw the ‘lapsed’ back into fold.” Many Catholics will wonder whether any evidence exists of the effectiveness of such an approach. More recently, in a virtually identical reference to the Adjudicator of another Catholic school by its diocese, the Adjudicator held that criteria relating to involvement in the life of the Church were permissible.
- The diocesan response to the question, “Why was Mr Barber appointed?” stands as a prime example of why parents’ confidence in diocesan intentions has been shaken. The claim that Mr Barber has been appointed to improve communications between the Diocese and the Governing Body is advanced despite the fact that his hectoring of the Governing Body in his capacity as Director of Education had been the subject of an earlier complaint to the Archbishop. Moreover, his denigratory references to Vaughan parents as “super Catholics” scarcely form a basis for the improved communication with parents that the Chairman of Governors claims to want.

Bishop Stack, like the Catholic Education Service, uses the rhetoric of “a family of Catholic schools”. As all good parents know, the effective promotion of harmony in a family and the flourishing of its individual members is incompatible with identical treatment for each; allowances must be made for individual abilities, needs and interests. The Church’s teaching on subsidiarity suggests that a “family of Catholic schools” should be nurtured in the same way.