

The children come first

In offering an invitation to children and young people from all backgrounds to participate in a Christian community, Church schools can provide a real experience of God's love for all humanity. In a Church school, pupils not only learn about religion but they can experience it as a living tradition and an inheritance of faith. Church schools are therefore a unique gift from the Church to an increasingly secular culture. The Archbishop of Canterbury has written:

Church schools are as concerned as any other school to equip pupils for lives marked by rapid change, global competition and insecurity. But Church schools know in their viscera that this is not just about acquiring skills and good examination results. It is about forming people who have the moral strength and spiritual depth to hold to a course and weather the ups and downs. It is about forming people who know that economic competition is not more important than family life and love of neighbour, and that technical innovation is not more important than reverence for the beauty of creation.

The Way Ahead, paragraph 3.23

A Church school is, or should be, a Christian community, modelled on the archetypal community, God the holy Trinity, bound together by love. Jesus teaches us to love God with all that we have and with all that we are, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Jesus, the Son of Man, who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life, shows us what that love is like. Those whom God first loves and serves are able to love and serve God and to love and serve their neighbours, with a service that is itself perfect freedom. The starting point is God's mission expressed in Christ. Through its schools, the Church reaches out in the name of God explicitly as part of God's mission to those in need of

God's loving service. So the school is not there primarily to serve the Church or the adults involved with it. What best serves the education of the children and their particular needs drives everything that happens in the school.

Each child is a unique human being made in the image of God. A Church school will be seeking to serve children, because they are unique, made in God's image and loved by him. It longs for the children to grow in the image of God, to be nurtured in the Christian faith and to grow to live the Christian life. But the means of demonstrating God's love for his children is one of service, providing education, not indoctrination or proselytization. And many will be welcome to whom the Christian faith is alien or unknown, children from families that adhere to another faith or that have no particular religious faith. They can be encouraged in their faith or challenged in their lack of faith.

There is nothing inconsistent in a Christian community confident in its own distinctiveness reaching out to include others and learning from others. It was the Samaritan leper, cleansed by the Lord's miracle, who returned to give thanks. 'Were not all ten cleansed?', Jesus asked. And he healed the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman at the well. Both of these stood outside the religious community of Jesus and his disciples. But he reached out to them and received from them.

No one is beyond the reach of God's love, although many, sadly, turn away from him. What is true of adults is true of children. Indeed, Jesus teaches us that the kingdom of heaven is for children and those who can become as children. This is not to adopt a starry-eyed view of childhood. Children are not angels.

What adults working in schools must fully understand and witness in their attitudes and behaviour is that, even when children are behaving like little demons, they are still within the scope of God's love and are still of great worth as human beings made in God's

image. Christ's command to 'love one another as I have loved you' is a key text for all who work in schools.

Having made some broad statements about the importance and worth of all children we must now turn to some of the detailed aspects of the life of the school as it seeks to serve them.

Spiritual development

Schools have a responsibility for the spiritual development of their pupils and of the community. This is not new. It was enshrined in the Education Act 1944 and restated in 1988. For the last ten years, schools have been inspected on this aspect of the curriculum. This has concentrated minds. More is said elsewhere in the book, but here is a brief Anglican perspective on spiritual development.

The spirit of a person is that person's spark, character, identity. People who are spiritually mature know themselves, what they are capable of, for good and ill, and have confidence in this self-knowledge. Emotions are ascribed to the spirit, so people who are spiritually mature are in touch with their feelings, are able to laugh and cry, to be delighted and moved, to be spontaneous and thoughtful. Balance is a thing of the spirit, so people who are spiritually mature have the measure of things and see them in their proper perspective, know what really matters. Courage is a thing of the spirit, so people who are spiritually mature can handle their fears and act with determination against the odds, can do right when it is easier to do nothing.

People who are spiritually mature, with a deep sense of themselves, know that they are loved by God and so are able to love, know that they are capable of great goodness and prone to great weakness and wilfulness, know how their spirit grows, as they measure themselves against the fullness of the stature of Christ

and know how their spirit is refreshed, through their deep encounter with the Spirit of God. People who are spiritually mature, with a deep sense of themselves, are able to reach out to others, to love, to care, to help, to serve, to be faithful, tolerant and patient.

This spiritual maturity develops in people's encounter with God in worship, prayer and stillness, with life, with events, with other people. It develops best as eyes are opened to the height and depth, to the length and breadth of all that is wonderful and amazing in the world. It develops best through experience consciously recollected. It develops best as questions of meaning and purpose are addressed in tranquillity.

The Anglican understanding of spiritual development draws on a rich tradition, from the Bible and from writers on the things of the spirit, throughout Christian history. Part of the work of a Church school is to put pupils in touch with this great inheritance of faith. Just as in intellectual development the school enables pupils to stand on the shoulders of the intellectual giants of the past and does not expect them to start in everything from first principles, so with spiritual development. And the Anglican tradition, drawing on a breadth of insights, Catholic and Reformed, ancient and new, is particularly diverse and rich.

Pupils in a Church school will become gently steeped in the particular part of the Anglican tradition represented by the local parish. But it is proper that they should also be introduced to forms of spirituality outside this experience. These forms may be the expressions of different styles of being Anglican, the practices of different Christian denominations and the practices and beliefs of different faiths. In all this, the approach for spiritual development is one of learning, of being enriched, not one of spiritual tourism or an exercise in human anthropology.

There is a caveat. It is not appropriate to expect pupils to take a full part in activities that are contrary to the beliefs in which they

are being raised or to which they hold. They can learn about how other people express their spirituality. They may discuss why this is important to those people. No attempt should be made to force them fully to participate. The issue here is not the legal rights of parents to withdraw their children from RE and school worship, but the respect that the school should be showing for the integrity of members of the school community. It is particularly important that Anglican schools demonstrate sensitivity in this area with pupils whose families are members of other faiths.

Spiritual development is not always smooth. It may entail suffering. It must certainly take account of suffering. Schools need to provide a safe and secure place in which children can work through issues that are distressing or worrying them. This implies that schools are not places in which emotions are suppressed but rather places in which they are acknowledged and given expression. A school where children and adults can laugh and cry together is providing an important emotional support and equipping children to grow into mature adults who are comfortable with their own emotions and sensitive to those of other people. The spiritual development of the whole community, including parents, teachers and other staff, even the governors and those who visit the school, is a proper aim for a Church school.

Moral development

Church schools are often reputed to have good discipline. Another way of looking at it is that Church schools set high store by the moral development of the pupils and of the whole school community. They have a good understanding of the ground and source of moral development in the Christian understanding of God and of humanity.

The word discipline has come to have several meanings in common usage. Anyone becoming involved in a school will need

to reflect on what it means in the context of a school. It is sometimes used instead of classroom control. We hear people talk about teachers having good discipline, meaning that they are able to exercise good control in the classroom. Again the word is used to describe the standards of behaviour demonstrated by the pupils: 'The school is well disciplined.'

It is really a misnomer to refer to a school discipline policy. Any policy that focuses only on discipline will fail. An effective policy must include not only a clear understanding of what will happen when things go wrong but also a clear statement of how the school will react when things go well.

The policy must relate to the school ethos statement and, therefore, in Anglican schools it will reflect Christian principles. Within the policy will be a clear statement of how the school will provide an experience of forgiveness and reconciliation when things have gone wrong. This may not be easy to sustain for those children who find conforming to the rules of the school difficult.

All the adults involved with the school must understand the school's policy and apply it as consistently as possible. Teachers will be in the lead on this, but everyone who has contact with the pupils will have a contribution to make. This must include the meal supervisors and other support staff, who are in regular contact with the pupils. The opportunities to provide them with training about their role in the policy and their work with the pupils may be limited, but it is vital that they are taken if there is to be consistency of practice throughout the day.

Another area in which it is hard to establish consistency is the reward system. Too often praise and encouragement come to those who achieve in absolute terms in classroom work, sport or music. Somewhere there must opportunities for pupils who do their best to be rewarded, not because they are top but because they have surpassed their previous best achievement. A challenge to many schools may be, 'How do we encourage and reward our

well-behaved triers?’ Amongst the strategies for achieving this are personal records of achievement or learning profiles, which seek to identify the whole range of a child’s interests, abilities and achievements as well as what they find difficult or challenging.

Many schools have found it helpful to agree certain basic statements about the standards of behaviour expected in the school, together with sanctions that will be applied if these standards are not met. These statements are then well publicized around the school in the expectation that this will promote consistency of behaviour and response. In most schools where this has been tried, it has been found to be helpful. It works well for most pupils, most of the time. Within any school community there are occasions when a pupil arrives at school in a very disturbed state or becomes very disturbed by what he or she experiences in school. For these children conforming to the basic rules becomes impossible. In such cases action needs to be taken swiftly to resolve the situation. A disturbed child needs to be taken out of the class setting and given help and support to enable him or her to return in a better frame of mind. Action like this does not condone bad behaviour, it seeks to prevent it. Swift preventative action also prevents other pupils from perceiving any unfairness in the application of the general rules.

By the time pupils leave school they should have developed into adults who are self-disciplined and who understand and accept that there have to be constraints on behaviour in a civilized society. The school’s discipline policy should have this as one of its goals. Governors should be able to identify how that goal will be achieved. One of the elements of such a policy will be giving pupils responsibility, in a safe environment, where failure is not a total disaster but an experience from which to learn. It will be clear that what has been said in this paragraph also relates to the citizenship agenda. As schools introduce citizenship into the curriculum it will become increasingly important that the experience of being part of a school community supports and develops what

is being learned in the taught curriculum about being a responsible and participative citizen of a local community.

There are some specific elements within a discipline policy that need to be addressed in more detail.

1. Exclusions: The law allows for pupils to be excluded from school in extreme cases. There is concern that some schools are using this sanction more than is absolutely necessary. Exclusion, where it is used, should be a response either to an extreme incident of unacceptable behaviour or to a long-term catalogue of incidents where all other attempts to bring the behaviour to an end have failed. Sometimes, in the way some schools have used this sanction, exclusion seems to be used as a response to bad behaviour that could have been foreseen or prevented. Periodically, schools should review their policy and practice in the use of exclusion in order to ensure that it is being used appropriately.
2. Corporal punishment: This is against the law and should not feature in any discipline policy.
3. Detention: Pupils may be kept back after school as a punishment but only after the parents have been given notice that the pupil will be late home. Inevitably this means that any detention can only take place some time after the incident that has led to this form of punishment.
4. Home-school agreements are a standard requirement for all schools. They have two specific contributions to make to a discipline policy: they make the basis of the policy open to all parents at the time at which the pupil enters the school; and they provide a basis for the development of individual agreements if the pupil's behaviour within school is being discussed with the parents. This second purpose has a particular importance when a pupil is either in difficulties or has been excluded for a short period and is now being prepared for re-entry into school.

5. Bullying is a particularly difficult problem to handle successfully. It involves at least four groups of people: the bully, the victim, the bystander and the adults within the community. A discipline policy will contain provisions for dealing with all forms of bullying from physical assault to name-calling and social exclusion. It will address how perpetrators are dealt with, victims supported and bystanders encouraged to be more active in the creation of good relationships between everyone in the community. The policy might have a useful side effect. Some adults lacking good classroom control have been known to resort to bullying pupils. A good anti-bullying policy should prevent this unacceptable adult behaviour.
6. Racism is a particularly unpleasant form of bullying. Every Church school should have a policy that actively addresses racism. This must include presenting positive images of our multicultural and multi-ethnic society, as well as details of the way in which racist incidents will be handled.

Attendance

Every child should attend school on every day that the school is open unless they are too ill to do so or there is urgent need for them to be elsewhere. If a child is not at school a parent should provide an explanation for the child's absence. In these days, when there is great concern for the safety of children, it is helpful if such an explanation is given to the school either before the absence, in the case of such things as hospital appointments, or at the beginning of the absence, if a child is ill. If parents establish a pattern of informing the school before or at the start of an absence, then the school is in a good position to identify incidents of truancy and also those rare incidents that give rise to concern about the child's safety.

There are several possible causes of truancy and schools will need

to be prepared to take action to deal with these causes where truancy is an issue. This will need the adults involved to work together in the interests of the child concerned. It is the parents' responsibility to ensure that their children attend school. Action taken to stop individual cases of truancy will, therefore, almost always need to involve the parents. One or more of the following factors may cause truancy:

- problems at school with teachers or other adults;
- problems at school with pupils;
- problems at home;
- peer pressure;
- attraction of activities outside school.

If the school is to take positive action to reduce truancy, it will need to be able to identify the causes of each individual's truancy and deal with them as far as lies within the power of the staff. In extreme cases a child may need to change school or have a special regime of support to enable him or her to make a return to full participation in school. The longer truancy is allowed to run on undetected or unchecked, the more difficult will be the child's return to school.

Truancy, however, is not always about missing whole days or sessions. A subsidiary pattern of truancy occurs in some schools, where pupils miss certain lessons, perhaps taking advantage of split sites or movement between buildings to avoid the most disliked subjects or teachers. Such truancy is best prevented by careful checking of registers at the beginning of lessons to ensure that the whole class is present and by taking action if pupils are not where they are expected to be.

In recent years there has been much pressure on schools to take action to reduce the incidence of truancy and unauthorized absence. There have been well-publicized court actions against

some parents who seem unable or unwilling to ensure that their children attend school when they should. Only headteachers can authorize absence. On some occasions they may be approached to authorize absence so that children can take part in family holidays. The provision that permits this type of absence is intended to enable parents who cannot take their annual leave during school holidays to have a holiday with their children. There is anxiety about the potential abuse of this provision. Headteachers should seek to encourage parents to use the school holidays as far as possible, so that absence from school is minimized. This is essential, for while presence at school does not guarantee learning, absence from school certainly reduces it.

There are separate but related issues in some schools over long-term absence during visits to family abroad, in particular in South Asia. A delicate balance needs to be maintained between, on the one hand, the proper wish of many parents with strong family roots and ties in other parts of the world for their children to develop a positive sense of these roots and to get to know members of their wider family in person and, on the other hand, the need for the pupil's education not to suffer through disruption. This balance is not easily achieved but it is the school's duty both to ensure that parents understand the educational loss that will occur through lengthy absence during term time and to work to minimize the actual loss by whatever means.

Intellectual care and safety

Schools should be places where ideas are explored and where individual differences are valued. This implies that pupils must be safe to explore their own ideas. They should be able to do this in an atmosphere which may reject the idea or challenge them to reconsider or explore the consequences of adopting the idea as part of their beliefs, but which never rejects them because

of the idea that they are exploring. Two examples will make the point:

1. An eleven-year-old boy was present at an act of worship, which included a presentation based on Genesis 1. At lunchtime he was heard to say to his teacher, 'You don't believe all this rubbish about God making the world in seven days, do you?' Some of his friends displayed shock at this expression of heresy in a Church school. The teacher accepted the comment and required the boy to take his expressed opinion seriously by responding with, 'What do you think?' There followed a lively discussion with the group, which explored some of the possible interpretations of the story.
2. A thirteen-year-old, in the course of a class discussion, made an overt but possibly unintentionally racist statement. The teacher in response made it clear that there were people in the class who would be offended by the remark and asked the pupil to explain why they would be offended. Having been given the opportunity to think through the issue, the pupil was then asked to rephrase the statement in a way that was not racist. Care was then taken to ensure that the other pupils in the group accepted the rephrasing. The idea was rejected; the pupil was not. If the pupil persisted in making racist statements then that would be dealt with within the context of the school's policy for dealing with racist behaviour. The principle here is that pupils should be given the chance to withdraw from unthinking offensive statements or ideas.

Another aspect of intellectual safety relates to peer pressure or bullying focusing on a pupil's ability or lack of it. This is most often stereotyped as the mockery of those who fail to learn as quickly as their peers or fail to acquire a sporting skill as easily. This is only one manifestation of this form of peer persecution. It can also manifest itself in the mockery of those who learn easily or who show real interest or enthusiasm for the material being

learned. Being mocked for what you can do is as difficult to deal with as being mocked for what you cannot. Schools need to guard against either of these developments by setting an atmosphere in which everyone is valued and in which pupils undertake such a range of different activities that everyone experiences success and failure and learns to come to terms appropriately with both.

Some educational needs and disabilities

Pupils may have Special Educational Needs as a result of a variety of factors. A Church school will have a particular concern to ensure that special needs, which are part of the child's uniqueness as a human being, meet with a suitable response.

Too often, adults automatically use a deficit model when they consider pupils with special needs. In order to guard against such thinking, the first group of special needs that will be considered will be those resulting from particular abilities.

There will be some pupils in every school who have a particular academic, artistic, musical or sporting ability. How are such pupils challenged to achieve the most of which they are capable? While developing their talents, how can a school ensure that they receive a rounded education?

There will be some pupils in every school who make normal or perhaps very good progress in most areas of school life, but find a particular concept or skill difficult to grasp and master. How does the school ensure that such pupils are helped and encouraged with the challenging aspects of their work? A moment's reflection will reveal that almost every pupil will come into this group from time to time.

There will be a few pupils in every school whose special needs are long term, some of them permanent. There are well-established procedures for identifying these needs and developing a strategy

for meeting them within the context of the school. For those whose needs are greatest this will include developing a formal statement. Every school must have a teacher who is Special Educational Needs coordinator and a governor who takes particular responsibility for this area on behalf of the governing body. For some of the pupils within the formal Special Educational Needs procedure, there are issues that are confidential. Governors not involved in Special Educational Needs work must accept that it may not be possible to share all the information about some pupils' needs.

In all schools there will be a need to ensure that buildings are adapted wherever possible to improve the access for pupils or adults whose mobility is reduced. It is important that governors support such projects in order to ensure that they meet their responsibilities for both the children and adults associated with the school. A failure to do so could put the governing body in breach of the duties imposed by the Disability Discrimination Act on all those responsible for buildings to which the public has access.

In all schools there will be a need to provide special equipment or special training for staff in order to ensure that the education of pupils is facilitated. In some cases finance or other resources will come from the LEA, Social Services or the Health Authority. Sometimes the school will meet these needs from its own budget.

Despite the widely accepted policy of greater inclusion in mainstream education, for some pupils there is still a need for special education in units designed for their particularly severe needs. Many of these are based within mainstream schools and thus facilitate integration. A few of these units, probably for those pupils whose needs are so great that only such schools have the resources to provide for them, will be separate from mainstream schools.

There is one exercise that can help governors and managers review their approach to the full range of Special Educational Needs in their school. For each subject area or main activity within the school ask three questions:

1. In this area of the school's life, how would pupils demonstrate that they had special abilities and how would we meet such pupils' needs?
2. In this area of the school's life, what short-term difficulties might pupils encounter, and what action would be taken to help them?
3. In this area of the school's life, what specific long-term learning difficulties might pupils demonstrate, and how would we help and sustain them through such problems?

Try this exercise for mathematics, music and religious education first. What does it tell you about your school?

Physical care and safety

The school will have a number of measures in place designed to ensure that the school is a safe place for children. Every adult who has substantial, unsupervised access to the pupils must be prepared to accept that they will be subject to clearance through the Criminal Records Bureau, under arrangements put in place by the LEA or by the Diocesan Board of Education. This is one of the basic precautions created to ensure that no one who has demonstrated that they might be a danger to children has access to them within the school context. Governors should set an example in this by willingly cooperating in obtaining clearance themselves.

Every adult entering the school premises will be asked to comply with the security arrangements that the school has in place. These

will probably include signing in and out and wearing an identity badge while on the premises. The school entrance will be clearly signed from every point of access to the school grounds and all visitors will be asked to report to the secretary's office or other reception point before attempting to visit any other part of the school. Schools in areas where there is deemed to be a higher than normal level of risk will also have other measures in place. Detailed advice on these matters is available to governors and school managers from both the DfES (or Welsh Assembly) and the LEA.

Physical safety is not just a matter of protecting pupils from attack by adults. It has many other aspects. The school will seek to ensure that all its activities are conducted in a safe manner, with precautions in place that are appropriate to the activity being undertaken. This includes the basic assumption that there is always an appropriate level of adult supervision. The governing body will have adopted policies, usually on the advice of the LEA, that set appropriate standards in these areas.

A further aspect of physical safety is safety from other pupils. There is much public concern over bullying in schools. The governors will need to be satisfied that policies, which they have approved, are in place and being observed to combat bullying wherever it may arise. No school can ever afford to be complacent in this area. All need active policies that both deal with incidents when they arise and are designed to prevent their occurrence. While most bullying is perceived to be about pupils bullying other pupils, there are other forms of bullying. Perhaps the most obvious, although rare, is bullying of pupils by members of staff. The governing body must act appropriately, under guidance, to deal with all accusations or incidents of this type.

The governing body now has clear responsibilities for the maintenance of the school buildings. These responsibilities extend to the health and safety aspects of the building, both for children and

for staff. In most schools there will be members of staff who have specific responsibility for ensuring that that building is maintained as a safe place in which to work. In some smaller schools the responsibility will fall directly on the headteacher. It is important that the responsibilities are clear and that periodically the school is inspected from a health and safety aspect to ensure that it continues to provide a safe environment.

But schools are not just about the prevention of harm. They should be seeking to be positive over such matters and to promote health. The Healthy Schools initiative is a good example of the way in which a number of strands of policy can be brought together into an approach that provides a positive dimension to this work.

School trips and journeys

At various times while they are at school, children should have the opportunity to take part in visits to places of interest as an integral part of the curriculum. They may also be offered the opportunity to participate in recreational activities as part of a school group. Both these types of activity are an important part of a child's overall educational experience. From the school's point of view, they provide a broadening of the curriculum and an opportunity to know and understand the children more deeply as a result of seeing them in a different context. They also make an important contribution to the social education programme in the school.

Every school trip, whether it is a walk to a local shop with the nursery children or a field trip to a distant part of Europe with sixth-formers, needs careful planning and preparation. There must also be good coordination with colleagues so that pupils are not faced with insoluble conflicts of interest or destructive competition between different departments' activities. The purpose,

costs and timing of trips will need to be carefully explained to parents so that they are in a position to make an informed judgement about their child's participation. Where a trip is an essential part of the curriculum, schools will need to establish how they are going to meet the costs, what part of these may legitimately be passed on to parents and how children whose parents cannot afford such costs will be enabled to take part. Where the trip is desirable, but not essential, and is therefore happening outside main school time, it will presumably be self-financing.

Governors will need to be satisfied that the school's arrangements for such trips take full account of the governing body's responsibilities for the health and safety of their pupils and staff. They should be satisfied that there are enough staff on the trip and that they are fully qualified and experienced to lead the activities that are to be undertaken. Where there are specialist activities that are being led by staff at the centre where the pupils are staying, the governing body will need to be satisfied that the centre has ensured that these staff have been properly trained to lead such activities with this age group of children.

The variety of children in the care of the school

The second paragraph of this chapter began with a statement about the uniqueness of each child made in the image of God. The school's task is the same as the task of parents and all those who love each child, to help them to grow truly to be themselves and thus to be able to make their own unique contribution to the development of God's creation. This nourishing of each child's individuality is particularly demanding for schools where children come in classes of 30 or more.

However, recent trends in education, which seem at first sight to militate against the development of the individual, could have the

paradoxical effect of encouraging it. Each school now knows its targets for SATs and for other public examinations. The government has set its own targets and individualized them for each LEA. The LEA has its own Education Development Plan and has individualized the targets for each school. Targets may seem to trivialize the education of the whole child, but they certainly avoid the risk of undervaluing basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. The aim of ensuring improvement in these areas, so that no one leaves school in the future unable to read and write, must be supported by everyone in Church schools and by the whole teaching profession. Most schools now individualize targets in these areas for each pupil and keep pupil achievements closely monitored in the light of their own targets. For this they must treat each child as an individual.

Some criticisms have been voiced about the return over the past few years to whole-class teaching. Certainly the literacy and numeracy strategies, which have been seen by most teachers as particularly successful, have demanded some whole-class teaching. Many teachers have found that refreshing. It is, however, particularly demanding for teachers to ensure that each child is participating and developing through these strategies to the best possible extent. There is room for a variety of teaching strategies. The current increase in the number of, and development in the skills of, learning support assistants might mean that small group work in future can always be led by an adult and thus retain momentum.

More pressing than the issue of pedagogical styles is the need to maintain breadth in the curriculum and to avoid a reduction to utilitarianism. Education must not be limited to what can be seen to have a useful purpose. The Latin root of the word suggests a meaning for education close to drawing out from each individual what is in them rather than stuffing them full of knowledge. The classroom should remain a place where breadth and individuality flourish.

This section has focused on the classroom but examples could be taken from every aspect of the school day. The school's first duty is to the child – each one individually. Even when the parents and the teachers are discussing the latest fund-raising proposals, the purpose is still to make the school a better place for the children for whom they share a concern and commitment.

Admissions

Every school must have an admissions policy. It comes into effect if the school is oversubscribed, that is, if a year group for which parents seek admission for their child has already the number of pupils set as the admission number for that year, or if the total number of applicants exceeds that number. The admissions policy must be published in the school's prospectus of information for parents. An admissions policy determines which children will enter the school. It also determines which children will not gain a place. It is hard but sometimes necessary for governors to make these decisions.

In voluntary aided and foundation schools the admissions policy is a matter for the governing body; they are the admissions authority for their school. The governing body determines the policy and a committee of governors makes the decisions based upon it. The committee may have the assistance of the headteacher and other members of staff but the policies are theirs and the decisions are theirs. Every year the governing body must consult with the LEA and with the governing bodies of other voluntary aided and foundation schools on their policy. They must take into account the effect of any changes on other local schools. The Government has indicated an intention to require this consultation only in alternate years unless the governing body intends to change its policy.

In voluntary controlled schools the LEA is responsible for

admissions. It is the admissions authority for all voluntary controlled schools and for all community schools. The LEA will determine the policy and make the decisions. If the LEA wishes to make changes, however, it must consult the governing body about the proposals. In some cases, the admissions policy adopted by the LEA recognizes the importance of denominational elements in the admissions criteria. *The Way Ahead* recommended that all LEAs adopt such criteria.

Following the 1998 Act, most LEAs established Admissions Forums. The Education Act 2002 made them a statutory requirement in every LEA. Under the Education Act 2002 LEAs were also given responsibility for the coordination of admissions procedures in their area. They have to discuss this role within the Admissions Forum. At the time of writing it is clear that this coordination of admissions will require changes to schools' admissions procedures. The biggest change will be that the LEA will receive from every admissions authority their own decisions about the pupils to whom they are prepared to offer places and the LEA will notify parents of the decision. The LEA should not be deciding between alternative offers, thus undermining the power of the admissions authorities. To avoid this risk, it seems likely that schools will have to list pupils in order of preference, rather than simply deciding whether to accept or reject. The intention is to reduce the confusion for parents; there may be an added burden for some governing bodies. In response to questions from the Churches, the Government made it clear, however, that there was no intention to undermine the admissions authority's power to determine oversubscription criteria. This may all have become clearer before you read this. Guidance will be available, of course, from the diocesan director of education.

The starting point for any school's admissions procedure is the number of places available. Until recently there has been some confusion about the way in which this can be calculated, because different parts of the law of education have, for different

purposes, produced varying ways of calculating the overall capacity of the school. The mysteries, obscure to most people, of standard numbers and admissions numbers and ‘more open enrolment’ (MOE) measures of the school’s capacity, are soon to give way to a new and simpler approach to the calculation.

The next series of decisions concerns those whom the school is called to serve. There is helpful guidance in *The Way Ahead*, which is now the policy of the Church of England. Anglican Church schools are to be distinctively Christian, indeed clearly Anglican, and to help them in this they should, as far as possible, have strong Christian leadership and a solid core of staff and pupils for whom the Christian character of the school is personally significant. Church schools should be places of Christian nurture. The report does not identify the size of the ‘solid core’, which, in some cases, as far as the pupils is concerned, may be quite small. That is acceptable because Anglican Church schools should also be inclusive of the local community, such as it is, and they will reflect the character of the community. Church schools should be places of Christian service. In inner cities and villages, the Church school is likely to be a neighbourhood school, the school to which everyone sends their children. A village school cannot reject all the non-Anglicans in the village and send them to the nearest non-Church school five miles away, whilst admitting Anglicans from a ten-mile radius. That is not the way. In the suburbs, where there is plenty of choice of primary schools or where pupils are anyway having to travel to secondary schools, a governing body may well decide to give first choice to practising Anglicans and then to Free Church Christians and so on. But some places should be available for children from the immediately local community and some for any children of other faiths whose parents seek, as they often do, an education that understands and respects religious faith and commitment. So there is no one-size-fits-all specification. But there is a clear policy: distinctive and inclusive; nurture and service; reaching out in mission.

In January 2002, the Church of England House of Bishops issued an important statement on this subject:

Bishops commit to inclusive Church schools

Church of England schools must be open to the diverse communities they serve, the House of Bishops says in a statement issued today. Their history of service to the nation's children requires Church schools to be inclusive in admissions, the bishops say, committing themselves to 'ensuring that all Church of England schools should seek to offer places to children of other faiths and of no faith in their local community'.

The House of Bishops statement, agreed unanimously, says:

'Through each of its 4,700 schools, the Church of England is strongly committed to serving the whole community from a distinctively Christian standpoint. Church schools must be distinctively Christian institutions rooted in the life of the parishes and open to the diverse communities they serve. Historically, Church of England schools have been a service to the nation's children and this requires them to be inclusive in admissions, as most already are. We are committed to ensuring that all Church of England schools should seek to offer places to children of other faiths and of no faith in their local community.

'It has been suggested that religious schools are divisive, but we note remarks in the Cattle report on *Community Cohesion* that, because of their location, "non-faith schools can have a very narrow range of pupils based around one culture". We welcome the policy that other faith communities should be invited to sponsor schools within the maintained sector and that these too should be inclusive. We support the suggestions for "twinning" between schools.

‘Children in Community schools have the right to experience the living faith of the various faith traditions within our society. All schools, whether rooted in a particular faith or not, need to promote the understanding of other faiths and cultures.’

The Education Act 2002 extended the powers of Diocesan Boards of Education to give advice to governing bodies of schools in the diocese. They should be in a position to give advice over admissions policies and governing bodies are required to have regard to the advice they have been given. They have, of course, relevant experience and they will also have an overview of the schools in the diocese and a diocesan policy about the character of those schools. In this often contentious and important area for schools of all kinds – and for the Church as people scrutinize the Churches’ work in education – schools are vulnerable to criticism and challenge. Other admissions authorities may object to a school’s over-subscription criteria. This will be dealt with by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, where the challenge concerns the religious criteria. In coming to a decision, the Secretary of State will be bound to ask what advice was received from the diocesan director of education and how the governing body had regard to that advice.

Framing a school’s admissions policy is inevitably difficult and complex, demanding a high level of clarity of thought and a real breadth of understanding of how parents (and sometimes their legal advisers) will read it. Here are some general principles.

- A good policy enables parents to see clearly where they stand. Clarity of wording is important.
- A good policy enables the governing body to draw a clear line between those children it will and will not admit.
- Unless the policy makes it clear that some other rule applies, the order in which the categories are listed is the order in which they must be applied.

- The policy should require statements made by parents to be verifiable by external reference.
- Governors need to make their decisions objectively and in accordance with their published criteria. Where the governors have obtained references or used other external data to make their decisions, these may become evidence if parents decide to appeal against the governors' decision.

The review of the policy by the governing body is only the beginning of the process. They must first consult with the DBE and with the LEA and other governing bodies about their proposals (see above). They should also seek the views of parents. Having carried out the consultation and approved the final version of the policy, the governors should then turn to the admissions application form. It should also ensure that the governing body collects from the parents all the information that it will reasonably need in order to apply the admissions criteria. A good test is to go through the criteria asking:

- Where, in the application form, do we find the information that is needed for each criterion?
- If we are going to take up references, where are we given the names and addresses of those who will provide the references?
or
- If the parents are being asked to submit a reference with their application, is it clear from whom they should obtain the reference and what information is required?
- Is there space for the parents to give all the information that we need?
- Is the form clear?

In some primary schools, approaches for places are often received on behalf of very young children. Of course, information can only be given on the admissions policy that is being used at the time of

the first approach. It should be made clear that this might have changed before the time when the formal application for a place has to be considered. Parents who seek to apply for a place before the admissions policy for the year in question has been adopted should be told that their application is premature and be sent information about the admissions arrangements at the appropriate time.

Timetable for applications

Within the information provided to parents there should be a clear indication of the timetable for the decision-making process. Local admissions authorities working through the Admissions Forum will have agreed this.

In many primary schools the timetable for applications is complicated by a pattern of entry into school that has children in the same year group starting school at different points in the school year. There needs to be a single process for deciding who will be admitted. Therefore, applications from the whole of the year group will be considered together regardless of their actual start date. This should ensure that the criteria are applied fairly to the whole year group. The decisions should usually be taken at least a clear term before the first children are scheduled to start school. This allows half a term for appeals to be resolved and half a term for the induction programme to take place. Since the Education Act 2002, the timetable has become a matter for the locally co-ordinated admissions arrangements.

The detailed decision-making process is undertaken by a small group of governors acting with the authority of the whole governing body. They need all the evidence available to them and they should act carefully to ensure that they consistently apply the governing body's policy. They must not alter that policy during the decision-making process, even if they come to the conclusion

that it needs further review. They must not use evidence that they have not been given formally. For example, in a small community it is possible that some members of the panel know some of the families whose applications they are considering. Governors must be careful to avoid being influenced by this personal knowledge.

Appeals

The existence of the appeals system allows the governing body to make unpopular decisions that they know to be necessary. For the appeals system to work properly the governors of the school must also be undertaking their own responsibilities effectively. Having decided to admit those children whom they believe best match their published criteria, governors need to view any appeals as a useful independent check on their work.

The appeals panel is entirely independent of the governing body and of the LEA. The costs involved are part of the usual expenses of running a school and, as such, should be met either through delegated budgets or from funds identified by the LEA for that purpose.

Appeals panels have two distinct issues to consider as they hear an appeal. First:

- Have the governors correctly administered their published policy in this case?
- Have the governors shown that admitting this child would prejudice the provision of efficient education at the school or the efficient use of resources?

If the answer to both these questions is 'yes', the second issue is a matter of balance between the parents' request for their child to be added to the school roll and the governors' explanation of the impact on the school of an additional pupil.

The appeals panel needs to hear all the appeals for places in a particular school before they decide to admit any child on the basis that this admission would, on balance, not have an excessively adverse effect on the use of educational resources in the school. If the panel feels that the school could admit two more pupils without undue problems, they must then decide which two of the pupils whose parents have appealed will receive the places. They can only do this fairly after they have heard all the appeals.

It is worth noting that different rules apply when a child has been refused admission to school on the grounds that such an admission would breach the restriction introduced in 1998 on infant class sizes (broadly, no more than 30 per class). In this situation the appeals panel can only allow the appeal if it is satisfied that the decision to refuse the child a place was not one which a reasonable admission authority would make, or that the child would have been offered a place if the published admission arrangements had been properly implemented.

While the appeals panel is a formal, independent body, its hearings are conducted in such a way as to put parents at their ease.

Admissions to nursery classes that are part of a maintained school – a special case

Everything that has been discussed about admissions so far applies to children entering school at or shortly before statutory school age. If the school has a nursery class, this raises different issues. There may be historic agreements about the admissions to the nursery, entered into at the time that it was agreed that one would be created at the school. These may allocate a certain proportion of places to children nominated by Local Authority Social Services department for example. Within the Local Authority Early Years plan these historic agreements may have been reviewed or superseded. Where there are no special criteria in existence resulting

from such constraints, the governing body is free to establish its own. In practice, it is almost impossible to sustain an admissions policy for the nursery that is different from that of the school in general. Parents do not accept statements that attempt to make it clear that a place in the nursery does not guarantee a place in the school. In one respect, however, the law is different. Parents have no right of appeal over the governors' decision not to admit their child to the nursery.



The National Society/Church House Publishing has published:

Spiritual Development in Schools, Brown, Alan and Furlong, Joan, 1996

Feeding Minds and Touching Hearts, Brown, Alan and Seaman, Alison, 2001

Moral Education, Ainsworth, Janina and Brown, Alan, 1995

Respect for All, Griffith, Daphne and Lankshear, David, 1996

which all relate to issues raised in this chapter. There is also relevant material in:

The National Society's Handbook for Inspection under Section 23 (third edition), 2000

and (for independent schools)

Christian Character, 2001.

More detail on all the issues raised in this chapter can be found on www.churchschools.co.uk.