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Faith

Faith schools chosen for quality, not religion

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Parents choose faith schools for their children for their academic standards rather than their religious ethos, according to a new survey.

Most people oppose state funding for faith schools although among young people, there was more backing for state funding.

The survey of 4,000 people by YouGov for the Westminster Faith Debates, an annual series of debates in London about contemporary religious and political issues, found that Christian faith schools have more support than non-Christian faith schools.

Just one third of those surveyed said they support state funding for faith schools in general. Nearly half actively disapproves, and the rest said they did not know.

About one-third of schools in Britain are state-supported faith schools, with most being Church of England or Roman Catholic, with the newest opened yesterday by the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, in Richmond, Surrey.

About a quarter of parents said they would choose a faith school for a child.

Overwhelmingly, people said that academic standards mattered most when choosing a school, while values and religion counted for far less.

Location and then discipline were the most important factors after academic standards. Just 3 per cent put transmission of belief about God high up the list of what mattered most when selecting a school for their children.

A majority of also said they did not object to faith schools discriminating on religious grounds in their admissions, as they are allowed to do.

Professor Linda Woodhead, of Lancaster University, said: "In abstract debates about faith schools people talk about religion. Secular activists oppose faith schools on grounds of religious indoctrination and discrimination, while religious people support them because of the faith element.

"But our poll shows that when choosing a school most parents aren't concerned with religion. They are concerned with academic standards. So long as parents want their children to get the best qualifications, so long as politicians of left and right

support parental choice and high academic standards, and so long as faith schools maintain these standards, the debate can rage, but faith schools are not going away.”

Archbishop Nichols, preaching at a Mass to open the St Richard Reynolds Catholic College, the new Catholic school in Richmond upon Thames, which has just inducted its first year 7 intake, said a parent’s choice to send their child to a faith school was a “precious right”.

Richmond has become the first borough in London to open a new Catholic secondary school in more than a decade. The borough was one of two London boroughs, alongside Bromley, that did not have a Catholic secondary school.

Many Catholic children in Richmond have previously been educated outside the borough as a result.

The new school will eventually have a capacity of 1,050 including 300 in the sixth form.

Richard Burke, the principal, said: “It has been a privilege being part of the movement that has brought St Richard Reynolds Catholic College into existence. Welcoming our year 7 pioneers last week as the College’s first cohort was historic, emotional and heart-warming.”

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A quarter of parents said they would choose a faith school for their child

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