

## Top Catholic school takes fight for admissions policy to court

London Oratory, which has counted sons of Tony Blair, Nick Clegg and Harriet Harman among pupils, claims education watchdog is endangering its ethos



A sign outside the London Oratory school, which claims the OSA made basic errors in its assessment of its admissions code. Photograph: Fiona Hanson/PA

Press Association

The religious ethos of one of England's oldest state-funded Catholic boys' schools is at risk after an education watchdog attacked its admissions code, the high court has heard.

The London Oratory, which has attracted the sons of top politicians, is challenging findings by the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) that many aspects of its admission arrangements for 2014 and 2015 breached the schools admissions code.

The OSA investigation was triggered by a complaint from the British Humanist Association about the faith-based criteria used to select pupils for places at the heavily oversubscribed Catholic academy, founded in 1863.

Charles Béar QC – representing the school whose pupils have included the sons of former prime minister Tony Blair, Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg and deputy Labour leader Harriet Harman – said the adjudicators' report was flawed by basic errors and a failure to apply the right legal tests.

Béar said the accusation by adjudicator Dr Bryan Slater that caused most concern was that less well-off Catholic families were “unfairly disadvantaged” by the school's admissions policy.

Applying for a judicial review, Béar said that was not the case and accused the adjudicator of misconstruing the meaning of the admissions code, adopting an unfair procedure and reaching “logically unsustainable” findings.

He said the popular and successful school promoted “a strongly Catholic ethos” and aimed to serve the Catholic community across London, taking in pupils from at least 25 boroughs.

Its pan-London mission was to assist parents to educate their children in the principles and teachings of the Catholic church, and provide a unique liturgical culture founded in the spiritual and musical traditions of its founders.

Because it was so heavily oversubscribed, there were annually at least 800 11-year-olds applying for 160 places.

The school's junior house, for pupils aged seven-11, and the sixth form, which admits boys and girls, were similarly oversubscribed.

Béar told Mr Justice Cobb at the London hearing on Tuesday: "The school view is that altering the faith-based criteria will alter the composition of the [pupil] intake and damage the school ethos."

James Goudie QC is arguing on behalf of the adjudicator that Dr Slater adopted the correct legal tests and was also "clear, fair and logical, and also completely consistent with the school admissions code".

The judge was told that the school had changed its 2015 admissions arrangements to reflect the adjudicator's findings after realising its judicial review application could not be determined in time.

But it wants clarification on whether the admissions policy it favours is lawful in time for pupil entries in September 2016 and for future years. The hearing continues.

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