

Gove: I won't relax rules on Catholic free schools



The Education Secretary Michael Gove has said he has no plans to relax the rule which means that no more than half of places in free schools may be reserved for Catholics.

In an exclusive interview with The Catholic Herald Mr Gove said that he was not prepared to lift the cap, regardless of demands from Catholic parents hoping to take advantage of the new scheme.

He said: “Remember, there’s no reason why a new school with only 50 per cent Catholic students shouldn’t have a wholly Catholic ethos. Of course, by definition, free schools are free to choose their own curriculum.

“Traditionally, Catholic schools have been concentrated in certain parts of the country. But Catholic parents who want a Catholic education for their children now have a way of providing it. Free schools are a way of increasing capacity, not limiting it.”

The Catholic Education Service for England and Wales (CES) said that retaining a maximum quota on Catholic intake undermined parental choice.

Responding to Mr Gove’s comments a spokeswoman for the CES said: “Our chairman, Bishop Malcolm McMahon OP, said before the 2010 General Election that he was interested in the idea of free schools established by local communities but after the election the Coalition Agreement introduced the 50 per cent quota on places for Catholic pupils and this has proved problematic for our sector.

“The 50 per cent quota policy undermines the Government’s own aim of increasing parental choice, since, in the case of an oversubscribed Catholic free school, Catholic pupils whose parents wanted to send them to a Catholic school would have to be turned away because they were Catholic.”

Dennis Sewell, a lay Catholic who is in the early stages of establishing a Catholic free school in Clapham, south London said: “I think Michael Gove is right. If governors and school leaders face up to the challenge, they can ensure that the inclusion of non-Catholic pupils does not dilute the Catholic character of a school.

“What really matters is that the Catholic faith is a reality at the heart of the school, permeating the

curriculum, teaching and learning, the behaviour code and all the various social interactions of school life.”

Some Catholic parents who were hoping to take advantage of the free school scheme were put off by the quota rule. Opus Dei is sponsoring two new Catholic schools in London but is not using the free schools initiative.

In the interview, Mr Gove also praised Pope Benedict, calling him “a wholly authentic figure”. He also described the Catholic Church’s role in education as “global and enduring”.

Catholic Herald - Madeleine Teahan