

## Good news from South West London Humanists

SW London Humanists this week celebrated the success of their North Kingston campaign for inclusive education and against a proposed new secondary school being run by the Church of England when the Office of the Schools Adjudicator announced its decision in favour of a bid to manage the school from Kingston Education Trust, a consortium of Kingston Council, Kingston University and the local FE College.

SWLH found much support from local parents for an inclusive neighbourhood school that would not discriminate against their children on religious grounds. A key role for humanists was to point out what local people often didn't know and weren't being told by supporters of the Diocese bid: how much influence the Church would have over the school's admissions policy for its very small financial investment; that, whatever the Diocese were saying about admissions, policies could change and the school become more religiously selective in future years; and that the fact that many local parents sent their children to Church primary schools demonstrated only that, for historic reasons, there were a great many of them within walking distance, not that parents were committed to faith-based education and demanding its continuation at secondary level.

Campaigning started early, even before there was an alternative bid to the Church one, with a petition on the Council website, which eventually attracted 255 signatures, asking the council to ensure an inclusive school. From then on we used every opportunity to keep the arguments in the public eye and to encourage alternative bids to manage the school by sending out press releases, writing letters to local papers and referring reporters and editors to the BHA and Accord websites if they wanted additional material. Local headlines included: "Faith in our schools?"; "Battle rages as church vies for school control"; "Humanists' fears over school places"; and, my personal favourite, when the Diocesan bid was formally announced, "God for bid".

We used local demographics and the pressing need for a non-selective neighbourhood school in Kingston to support our case, and we were always careful to attack religious privilege and discrimination rather than religious belief – though others who wrote letters to local papers (on both sides) were less temperate. Via our monthly newsletter we kept SWLH members updated and encouraged them to write their own letters to the local media, councillors and MP. We offered them some arguments, both local and general, and provided the addresses of local papers, but did not provide standard letters or postcards, as individually expressed letters are far more effective. There were over 30 letters in the local press opposing faith schools during the campaign, not all from SWLH members – more numerous, and on the whole better argued, than those from Church supporters. Our chair, Jeremy Rodell, was tireless in maintaining a civilised discussion and campaign and correcting inaccuracies and misinformation in the local press.

We also responded to consultations individually and collectively, attended the local consultation meeting and held a public meeting of our own with James Gray of the BHA speaking persuasively for inclusive schools. According to a reporter at the local paper, the Diocese is now claiming that SWLH packed the public consultation meeting with humanists; in fact we would have had problems packing such a large meeting and most of those present and speaking against the Church bid were unknown to us – just local concerned parents. Before the end of the consultation period, we leafleted local primary schools, helped by some keen local parents.

We were also helped by the majority (Lib Dem) party on the local council wanting the Kingston Education Trust bid to succeed, and by having some friendly contacts amongst local councillors who seemed glad that we could campaign more freely than they could. Local Conservative councillors and MP Zac Goldsmith, while probably keener on the Church school bid, tended to sit on the fence and say they wanted whatever local parents wanted.

While SWLH can take a great deal of credit for raising local awareness of the issues and for increasing the number of responses to the consultation, in the end the adjudication was not based on numbers supporting or opposing, or on the principles that we highlighted, and for future campaigns, the full adjudication (at <http://www.schoolsadjudicator.gov.uk/upload/STP526%20Kingston%20Comp.doc>) is well worth

reading and instructive. Though the Adjudicator acknowledges that a large group strongly opposed the principle of faith schools, he says: "Clearly we cannot reject the SDBE [Southward Diocese Board of Education] proposal on the basis of the objections in principle: the law provides for faith schools..." (para 40) and he appears to have been convinced by Diocesan claims that their admissions policy would be inclusive and proportionate (despite its setting aside of one third of places for children of practising Christians + a further 7% for other faiths). However, he did note that earlier consultations had found "little evidence of demand for faith-based provision" (para 39) and that "Whilst there is no Church of England school in the Borough of Kingston, such schools are available in neighbouring boroughs and within reasonable travelling distance." (para 22). The decisive factor seems to have been the distinctiveness of the KET bid and its potential to increase local choice and diversity: "The KET proposal is stronger than the SDBE proposal when examined from the point of view of diversity of provision and local support. Its proposal would lead to the establishment of a unique new option which would be welcomed by parents." (para 41). These are all local factors and arguments worth looking out for in future local campaigns; in particular, it is clear that while "choice and diversity" continue to be political buzz-words, alternatives to faith-based schools must be seen to contribute to that.

Whether it was the SWLH that tipped the balance or not, our campaigning certainly raised our profile locally, established good contacts with the local press, attracted active support from a number of new people, and allied us with the majority party on Kingston Council – all good results, though nothing like as good as the final decision.

*Marilyn Mason*  
*S W London Humanists education focal point*

**See also**

<http://www.surreycomet.co.uk/news/8770507.BREAKING NEWS Council beats church in race to run new school/>

[http://www.kingston.gov.uk/information/news\\_and\\_events/news.htm?id=111406](http://www.kingston.gov.uk/information/news_and_events/news.htm?id=111406)

<http://www.schoolsadjudicator.gov.uk/upload/STP526%20Kingston%20Comp.doc>