

TABLET Education

SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

FEBRUARY 2009



In from the cold

Teaching excluded children in specialist units costs four times more than mainstream schools and they emerge with few or no qualifications. So what is the alternative? **Victoria Combe** looks at the Government's plans to overhaul Pupil Referral Units, or 'sin bins'

In an upstairs room ominously labelled "Behaviour Management", five teenage boys from the Charter School in Dulwich, south-east London, are learning about the impact of crime. An ex-prisoner had already been to speak to them and they are planning a trip to the Old Bailey. All the boys are there because of their challenging behaviour and are part of a Prince's Trust-run programme designed to keep them in mainstream education.

It is this kind of project the Government has in mind in the pilot scheme it is launching aimed at reducing the number of children permanently excluded from school. The Department for Children, Schools and Families is giving £26.5 million to fund a dozen innovative schemes that will be run by a partnership between charities and local authorities. Unlike the project at Charter School, the new establishments will have their own

buildings and a large portion of the grant will go towards creating a pleasant environment. The intention is to remove some of the stigma attached to the 450 Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) where excluded children go or those who cannot be placed in mainstream school for other reasons, such as pregnancy.


Each year 135,000 children spend time in a PRU at a cost of £410 million to their local authorities. Another £100 million goes on behaviour-support services. The results are poor: only 1 per cent of 16-year-olds achieved five GCSE passes (A*-C) compared to 48.5 per cent in mainstream schools in 2006. The Department for Children, Schools and Families is clearly hoping that charities like the Prince's Trust, Kids Company and Barnardo's will channel fresh ideas and energy into a tired system. Its White Paper "Back on Track: A Strategy for Modernising Alternative Provision for Young People", published in May, described PRUs as costly with poor accountability.

"There is a clear economic as well as moral case to do more through early intervention to minimise the need for permanent exclusion," wrote Ed Balls, the children's minister, citing that it cost £15,000 a year to educate a child full-time in a unit, compared with £4,000 in a mainstream school. "Too many of these young people not only fail to fulfil their own potential, but go on to cause serious problems for themselves and their communities."

One pilot project will be a new version of "xl", the two-year course for 14- to 16-year-olds already being run by the Prince's Trust's in 300 schools. This time it will run jointly with Kids Company which also has a track record in helping excluded children. The two charities have been promised £2.1 million (£1.64 million of which is for the building) to look after 30 pupils. Westminster City Council is providing the premises and the centre is due to open later this year.

At the Charter School I was able to see why xl is popular with pupils. They liked the informal style and small, single-sex classes of 10 or fewer. They were going to xl between three and six hours a week in school and working for certificates in three "wider key skills" called "Problem Solving", "Working with Others" and "Improving Your Own Learning". The girls showed me a project on body image and a report on a visit to a sexual-health clinic. The boys had worked on a business venture in the style of

INSIDE | Co-ed or single-sex? | Spotlight on Heythrop | Defending church schools



FACILITATION SKILLS
A new way to lead

A 5 day programme for those in a leadership role within a Religious Congregation or Diocese

This programme will:

- Enhance your competence and confidence in using a facilitative approach
- Increase your ability to deal with group dynamics
- Provide you with a leadership tool kit

Dates: 1 - 5 June 2009
£645/person (non residential)
Venue: Kinharvie Institute, Glasgow

For further information or to book please contact Audrey MacNeill on 0141 337 1070 or email Audrey@Kinharvie.org.uk

www.Kinharvie.org.uk SC000565



JUNIOR SCHOOL Boys and girls 3-11
SENIOR SCHOOL Girls 11-18

****Boys 11+ and 6th Form entry from September 2009 – Fully co-ed 2013****

- ◆ From Nursery to A Level
- ◆ High academic standards in a caring Christian environment
- ◆ Extensive bus network
- ◆ Early Years Funding
- ◆ Scholarships & bursaries scheme

DATE FOR DIARY
Junior School Open Morning
Thursday 5 March 9.00am-11.30am

Radley Road, Abingdon OX14 3PS
Senior School Tel : 01235 524658 Junior School Tel : 01235 523147
office@olab.org.uk www.olab.org.uk

the BBC1 television programme *Dragon's Den* with City University and been to see the workings of Parliament. Sitting around a table, munching chocolate biscuits, one boy admitted: "I thought xl was going to be rubbish, but it has turned out to be good." The trips, he said, were best, and the help in finding work experience in engineering companies.

Ginny Lunn, Prince's Trust policy director, believes that one of xl's key ingredients is small classes. "It is very difficult in big classes and very hard for teachers to keep all the pupils stimulated. Our aim is to support the teachers not replace them. PRUs have a negative image as 'sin bins' and we try to create a more positive environment."

To understand the value of Kids Company's therapeutic approach I visited one of their existing educational projects, the Urban Academy, near London Bridge. Out of 180 pupils aged between 16 and 23 most had been excluded from school, been homeless and a number of the girls had children. The academy appoints a key worker to each pupil to help with practical matters such as housing and court appearances. The pupils must commit to attending the academy for an hour-and-a-quarter a day, which is gradually increased, and in return they receive £40 education allowance a week. They have art and music therapy, osteopathy, aromatherapy and courses on subjects including fashion, film and English literature.

The therapy room where I met Christina Enright, a psychotherapist for children and adolescents, had just been trashed by a young woman in distress about her relationship with her mother. Did Ms Enright ever feel she was fighting a losing battle to help young people with such deep-rooted problems? "No, I don't, and it's not too late to help them. The brain is malleable up to the age of 30 and we can help them to build relationships and understand and regulate their emotions."

The need to give structure and a sense of purpose to troubled children is the central aim behind another pilot in Knowsley borough in the North West. The Skills Academy, which opens in Kirby in September, has been given £720,000 to run a military-style course for 60 pupils at risk of permanent exclusion. A retired army officer, Lt Col. Tony Hopkinson, will be in charge and the academy will teach boys and girls – all of whom will wear uniform – a variety of courses, including physical training, drill, cooking and signals.

"When they are in uniform they are all the same," said Lt Col. Hopkinson, who once ran the army's preparation course. "We will teach them map-reading and communications, so they can see the practical value of calculating and being literate. The aim is to give them a different perspective on their education."

In Rotherham, South Yorkshire, Barnardo's is working in partnership with the council to establish three new centres to replace the PRUs. The focus there will be to establish links with schools and families. The crime reduction charity Nacro will run Liverpool's new centre for excluded pupils. "There is no way otherwise our organisation could have access to such a building and be able to create such a different and imaginative project," said Michelle Hill, Nacro's business development manager in the North West.

Will the injection of cash and all these fresh ideas make a difference? The charities involved were full of optimism but others who work with troubled children have reservations. Rosemary Keenan, deputy chief executive of the Catholic Children's Society (Westminster), fears the Government is primarily concerned with keeping troublemakers off the streets and not with addressing the causes of their behaviour.

Dr Keenan oversees the School Counselling Service which helps children threatened with exclusion in 22 London schools (12 of them Catholic) through one-to-one therapy and family counselling. "In the rush to get parents out to work, the Government needs to ask how much it is contributing to society's problems," she said. "The wrap-around care provided by schools which starts as early as breakfast and ends in the evening cannot replace the parenting role or responsibility. What we are left with is children who have had a considerable number of adults telling them what they can or cannot do and it is harder for them to know right from wrong."

Most children the Catholic Children's Society sees have issues that influence their behaviour such as family break-up, abuse, parents with addictions or mental illness, learning difficulties, bullying and racism.

Indeed Ed Balls acknowledges the imperative of family responsibility in the White Paper: "The primary responsibility for bad behaviour sits with young people themselves and with parents and families," adding that alternative provisions for excluded pupils can "support" but not "substitute" the family's role.

But Dr Keenan's concern is that a child taken out of school and

put in a unit with other excluded children will come out worse, no matter how nice the facilities are.

"The danger is that children get labelled as being a problem. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – when they are put with other children bearing the same label their behaviour gets worse," she said.

Intervening early before a child gets labelled or excluded is the thrust of many of the new pilots. But I realise from speaking to those at the sharp end that there is no simple or quick solution.

The aim is to give them a different perspective on their education'

■ Victoria Combe is a freelance journalist.

Mixed benefits

WHILE a great many schools have become co-educational in recent years, there is still a school of thought that holds that girls do better if they are educated separately.

Last month's secondary school league tables reinforced that view, with girls' schools featuring among the top performers.

The theory was also given a boost last November when the Undersecretary of State for Schools and Learners, Sarah McCarthy-Fry, said a return to single-sex education would make it easier to stimulate

Debate continues to rage whether single or co-ed schools are better – for the pupils and the school. We talk to two head teachers with differing views

girls' interest in subjects such as science and engineering.

She suggested that girls sometimes felt intimidated in mixed-sex classes with boys hogging the limelight and putting their hands up to answer all the questions. Just a week earlier the president of

the Girls' School Association and principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College, Vicky Tuck, predicted a reversal of the trend towards co-education with more schools returning to single-sex schooling on the grounds that girls benefited from this.

The debate rages particularly in the independent sector where a single-sex school can potentially double its intake by going co-ed.

But which environment benefits pupils the most? Here, two Catholic head teachers give contrasting views in the debate.



Katherine Jeffrey: principal of New Hall School, Chelmsford, Essex

In 2006, we became the first Catholic school in Britain to adopt what is known as

the "diamond" model. In such schools children are educated in a co-educational environment up to age 11. They then transfer to a boys' division or girls' division, where they are taught in single-sex classes until the end of GCSEs. After that, boys and girls progress to a co-educational sixth form.

While girls' schools often focus on the academic arguments in favour of single-sex senior education, I believe the main benefits derive from the ability of these schools to tailor their pastoral and academic provision more sensitively to the needs of adolescent girls. At this time boys and girls are developing at significantly different rates and in different ways. The advantages of single-sex education at this stage are primarily in relation to the distinctive, gender-specific support they can give to young people going through the emotional, hormonal and social upheaval of adolescence. Girls, who are entering a challenging stage of development when they start at senior school, are helped by being in classes and common rooms where their peers are experiencing similar issues. In the same way, boys benefit from an educational system that recognises their needs and can respond effectively because the pastoral and academic structures are designed for them. Where girls and boys are taught separately, positive peer influence can replace negative peer pressure.

There are distinct academic advantages also. When, for example, girls go to lessons in physics, mathematics or technology, or boys go to lesson in music, cookery or modern languages, everyone experiences the subjects as gender neutral, because the classes are single-sex. In an ideal diamond-model structure, the curriculum provided

Co-ed schools develop pupils into rounded, capable personalities able to deal with anything that the world can throw at them. Being on an equal footing with members of the opposite sex from the word go is vital in making young people totally at ease by the time they leave school. If you look ahead to when a person is 25, it's likely that they will be living and working in a mixed-gender environment and the earlier that they get used to that the better.

Single-sex schools do regularly top the league tables but the underlying truth is not that simple. In 2006, the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) commissioned a major research project that found being co-ed or single-sex was not the determining factor in the performance of schools – other factors were responsible for generating the performance differences that are manifest in the league tables.

Co-ed schools have an intellectual vibrancy about them, brought about by the creative tension between the sexes and the increased diversity of perspective and experience that the pupil mix brings to the classroom. For instance, when dealing with literature, boys who are a bit bullish are forced to reflect and be more empathetic when girls are around. Likewise, some of the girls may experience the inevitable male bravura and learn something from it. The result is an intellectual experience that stimulates and questions perspectives in a way that single-sex schools find difficult to emulate.

Nevertheless, as a parent, one may be

concerned about potential "distraction" from academic work in a co-ed school. Distraction will, however, always occur in one form or another at any school. There may be issues over boyfriends or girlfriends or over other things such as the casting of the school play or who has made it into the rugby first XV. If you learn to deal with all such issues at the age of 14, that's a life skill. If, however, you don't experience mixed-gender life until you are at university or working – when you have less access to guidance – then any distraction is far more likely to be destructive.

Tim Waters: headmaster Trinity School, in Teignmouth, Devon, a joint Catholic and Anglican foundation



The complex social web that exists at a co-ed school also has great pastoral benefits. Boys and girls tend to support one another and the resultant community is better at absorbing problems. Single-sex schools can, by contrast, be more socially brittle, with cliques and groups that are more socially closed and more awkward to manage effectively. Although there are many excellent single-sex schools, co-education has numerous inbuilt advantages making it a compelling choice for the majority of today's parents.

Up until the end of GCSEs, the diamond-model senior school provides the chance to combine the academic benefits of single-sex education with the social advantages of co-education. At lunch and in extra-curricular activities boys and girls will mix and make friends. This provides a balanced, all-round education, and the practical benefits that sons and daughters can be educated on the same campus, with the same term dates.

can feel immense peer pressure by having to perform in mixed classes.

Up until the end of GCSEs, the diamond-model senior school provides the chance to combine the academic benefits of single-sex education with the social advantages of co-education. At lunch and in extra-curricular activities boys and girls will mix and make friends. This provides a balanced, all-round education, and the practical benefits that sons and daughters can be educated on the same campus, with the same term dates.

In pursuit of the next challenge

In an elegant square just off London's High Street Kensington, nestled between the multi-million-pound homes of Russian oligarchs, stands Heythrop College.

The Jesuit institution, which specialises in philosophy and theology, has grown in recent years, offering an imaginative range of courses and taking a leading role in interreligious dialogue in Britain.

Yet the college's academic record suffered a blow recently when independent analysis of its scholarly output produced results that were less than favourable. In the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), published last December, the college came near the bottom of the table among institutions such as the University of Sunderland and the University of the Highlands' Millennium Institute. Another Catholic institution, St Mary's University College in Twickenham, and Liverpool Hope University, an ecumenical institution, did rather better.

However, Heythrop's leading figures have been quick to argue that the research league table does not tell the full story. They insist the college is a flourishing academic institute serving the Church and world through the teaching of theology and philosophy.

"We now have 950 students, a number which has doubled in the past five years," says Peter Vardy, vice principal of the college. "It has tripled in the past 10 years."

Such growth, he argues, has been fuelled by the large number of part-time Masters degree courses on offer and the booming interest in religious studies in schools. Dr Vardy is renowned for his books on the

Heythrop College is one of the jewels in the crown of the Society of Jesus in Britain. A centre of excellence for the study of theology, it has grown rapidly in recent years. Why then has its record on research been found to be lacking, asks **Christopher Lamb**

philosophy of religion regularly used in A level courses and two other Heythrop academics, Dr Stephen Law and Dr Michael Lacewing, are also popular among secondary-school students.

"We have three of probably the best-known people in schools in terms of philosophy of religion and ethics, and, six years ago, we were the first in the country to introduce a degree in philosophy, religion and ethics. As a result, we have a number of prospective undergraduates interested in studying here," says Dr Vardy.

Numbers will be further boosted after the Society of Jesus' recent acquisition of a 96-room residence for students from the Sisters of the Assumption, who live in the convent next door. Heythrop is currently the Society's most labour-intensive enterprise in Britain and one of three centres in Europe used for training novices.

Despite being run by Jesuits, the college attracts a large number of Anglicans and is

apparently the first choice for Church of England bishops, who regularly send their clergy and staff on Heythrop's spirituality and liturgy courses.

The mission to reach out to others also includes extensive work in interreligious dialogue, and a BA in Abrahamic faiths, the first of its kind in Europe, was launched two years ago. This has led to a rather impressive example of Islamic-Jewish friendship. "Last year, we had an Orthodox Jew, Jonathan Gorsky, sharing an office with Mohammad Shomali, a professor from Qom in Iran, the biggest centre of theological formation in Shia Islam," says Dr Vardy.

Aside from the groundbreaking academic courses, Heythrop will soon offer a degree for laity in pastoral mission, developed with the Archdiocese of Westminster. The college also runs an Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life, a Religious Life Institute and Centres for Eastern Christianity and Philosophy of Religion.

THE TEACHER WHO INSPIRED ME

I had the privilege to be taught English A level by Philip Lawrence in the early 1970s. His tragic death – Lawrence was stabbed in December 1995 at the gates of St George's school in Maida Vale, where he was headmaster, when he came to the rescue of one of his pupils – was typical of his character. Of all his qualities, courage was only one of them.

I attended St Benedict's School in Ealing, west London, while Philip Lawrence was taught at another Benedictine school, Ampleforth. Although I would say I am more secular than religious, the Catholic values and experiences of my childhood certainly had a positive influence, teaching me about the value of all human beings and the conservation of the natural world, which resonates with the work I am doing now.

Philip Lawrence's first teaching job was at St Benedict's, in his early twenties, so he wasn't much older than the teenagers he taught. As such, he was a great friend as well as our teacher, accompanying us to the theatre and then often to the pub for a

COBB/GREENPEACE AND ROSE/GREENPEACE



John Sauven remembers the late Philip Lawrence, who was killed protecting a pupil

beer. He was a very colourful character – we nicknamed him "Flowery Phil", because of the velvet jackets he used to wear. He was a bit like Tigger in *Winnie The Pooh* – full of energy, bouncing rather than walking into the classroom.

He introduced me to a lot of poets and, being Irish himself, had a great love of Irish poetry. In particular, he was always quoting Yeats, another vibrant character. If I try now, several decades later, to recall something Lawrence said, it would be romantic lines from Yeats. No surprise then, perhaps, that he got together with

Frances Huntley while at St Benedict's, who was our young and beautiful French teacher. They married in 1975.

Schools in the 1970s, in the private sector anyway, often had quite a harsh reality, with detentions and beatings; they weren't full of inspiration and passion, humour and fun, yet these were the qualities Philip Lawrence had by the bucket-load. I think there are two ways of dealing with children as a teacher – one is to be encouraging and inspiring, giving positive feedback; the other is to detain and punish them, which inevitably leads to lower self-esteem. Lawrence was very much of the former camp.

He was certainly a larger-than-life character. When he was murdered, it came as a great shock to me; not least because I wondered what he could have gone on to achieve at St George's, which was a very rough school in quite a rough area, but he was made for that challenge. It is tragic that his life was cut short.

■ John Sauven, 54, is executive director of Greenpeace UK.

While the extra numbers and new ventures all make for a vibrant institution, none of them will help to bring in much needed funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England, known as Hefce. Heythrop only started benefiting from this two years ago, and needs to demonstrate a proven track record in research if it is to receive a more generous slice of the Hefce cake. The importance of a good showing in the RAE is imperative considering the large rewards on offer: the Open University, for example, was awarded £176 million in 2007.

Dr Vardy readily accepts that things need to improve. "We are going to take research more seriously," he says. "We should be better on those league tables, there is no question. It is not the sort of reputation we want Heythrop to have."

He says that internal measures have been taken to make sure that the performance improves: scholars have been encouraged to write more regularly for academic journals and funds have been made available for staff to visit international conferences. Both these should result in a higher standing in research rankings.

Dr Vardy does stress, however, a number of factors behind Heythrop's difficulty with research ratings. The Jesuits' mission is in teaching: Dr John McDade SJ, Heythrop's principal and a leading authority in systematic theology, lectures first-year students, and the college still operates a one-to-one tutorial system, which takes up a lot of staff time. This emphasis on teaching has, of course, borne impressive fruit: at the last quality inspection, it was shown that Heythrop takes in students at lower academic levels than any other University of London college, and they produce much better results. While a lot of universities demand that their best scholars regularly publish research – and thus improve their RAE standing – Heythrop has never pressurised its top brains to write.

"Let me give you an example," says Dr Vardy. "We have a shuffling figure walking down our corridors looking like a tramp. He's fluent in Aramaic, Copt, Syriac, Latin and Greek, speaks six European languages, absolutely brilliant, one of the finest scholars internationally in the biblical field. But he's only written two books."

The college also says it has refused to "play the game" of maximising its research output, as other institutions do, by "buying in" professors simply for their research.

Some of the reasons given for its recent RAE performance, however, might be baulked at by certain academics. The college says a number of younger scholars were allowed to submit their research, despite having less than the required four "outputs", that is pieces of work, simply for the kudos of doing so. This would have weakened the college's ratings further. While it is praiseworthy that Heythrop has not simply gone after the money, one can't help think that St Ignatius of Loyola might gently point them to Matthew 10:16: "Be



Heythrop must address the question of research without compromising its teaching ideals

cunning as serpents and innocent as doves."

While the college has committed itself to improving research in the coming years, this will not be an easy task. For scholarly work to be deemed as research, it needs to be termed "new", a difficult thing to do in theology and philosophy.

"Unless you can prove that Augustine was a transvestite or something, it's rather tricky," says Dr Vardy. "How much has happened since the Council of Chalcedon (451)?"

Perhaps understandably, therefore, a

portion of Heythrop scholarly work has been deemed by the RAE to be "knowledge transfer" – in other words, a reformulation of already existing ideas. While this might be useful to students, it is termed as "unclassified" and negatively affects an RAE score. This transfer of knowledge is, however, deemed by the college as the "best service" it can give to the Church.

Eminent Jesuit scholars of recent times – Karl Rahner, Fr Gerard O'Collins and Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini – might take issue with this argument. Rahner, for example, one of the theological architects of the Second Vatican Council and credited with groundbreaking work in Catholic self-understanding, surely had a more ambitious goal for theology than simply "knowledge transfer". And all three would believe strongly in the possibility of new theology.

There is, without doubt, valuable "Kingdom of God building" work going on at Heythrop: the devotion to teaching, the ideal of theology as serving the Church, the imaginative courses. "This is also a rare academic community in that we actually like each other," adds Dr Vardy. "It's an incredibly special place."

Yet, if the quality of its research, the bread and butter of any university, is not what it should be, the funds for anything else will simply dry up. The challenge for Heythrop is to address the question of research without compromising its teaching ideals.

ALL HALLOWS COLLEGE

DUBLIN, IRELAND



UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMMES:

- BA in Theology & Philosophy
- Theology & Psychology
- Theology & English Literature

*Four year programme
Mature applicants welcome
May also be taken on a part-time basis*



POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMMES:

- MA in Leadership & Pastoral Care
(full - and part-time)
- MA in Management for Community and Voluntary Services
(full - and part-time)
- MA in Social Justice & Public Policy
(part-time over two years)
- Research Masters and Doctoral Degrees

The Registrar, All Hallows College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, Ireland.
T: +353 1 837 3745 F: 837 7642 E: info@allhallows.ie www.allhallows.ie

All Hallows College is a college of Dublin City University
All degrees are validated and accredited by DCU



On a cold morning in late 2003, I remember finding myself sitting in the office of a Cambridge don discussing Dostoevsky's portrayal of Christ in *The Brothers Karamazov*. I had recently turned 19 and was just waking up to the wonderful world of the University of Cambridge, where I had chosen to read Theology.

I found being a Catholic at Cambridge an enriching experience. First, I would highlight the respect for tradition which a university as old as Cambridge inevitably has. So much of what I saw around me easily resonated with my Catholic sensibilities, such as the Latin grace before "formal hall" dinners.

In addition to this, the Faculty of Divinity had, during my time there, a good balance of teaching staff. I did not have the sense that ideology got in the way of good judgement when it came to recruiting first-class lecturers. One of the real strengths of the faculty was that you could, for example, go from a lecture on modern theology given by a liberal Anglican straight into one on the Reformation given by a conservative Catholic.

Fisher House, the university's Catholic chaplaincy, was another source of support. The regular student lunches it offered were a great way of bringing people together and

A tale of two Cambridges

How does studying theology at one of the great English universities compare with its equivalent in the United States? **Simon Hull**, a Catholic student who has studied at both Cambridge and Harvard, has reservations about the American experience



St Paul, Harvard's Catholic chaplaincy

provided a good chance to talk about matters of faith openly and intelligently. In addition, my college (Fitzwilliam) was just up the road from Blackfriars, the Dominican priory.

I cannot overemphasise how great a source of support both the friars and the Dominican sisters in Cambridge were during my time there. Blackfriars was a nurturing space, and it was so in part because it was steeped in Church tradition and wasn't attempting to water down those traditions in a misplaced attempt to "appeal to young people". I say misplaced because what first drew me to Blackfriars was above

all the conviction with which the friars there held and taught the Catholic faith.

Since 2007, I have been studying for the Master of Theological Studies degree at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In terms of how Harvard compares to Cambridge in a general sense, I would above all mention money. Harvard has the kind of spending power that Cambridge simply doesn't. This translates

School Report

Loreto College, Manchester

Composition: This sixth form college for 16- to 19-year-olds is located in the inner city area of Moss Side, in Manchester. The majority of the school's 1,800 students come from Catholic high schools in Greater Manchester and Salford.

Position in class: The college has a reputation for helping students with average GCSE grades to improve significantly their performance at A level. In last month's post-16 league tables the college's contextual value added score put it in the top five per cent of schools and colleges nationally. The score evaluates pupils' performance at A level against the grades they were predicted to achieve based on their GCSE results. Overall, in 2008 the college achieved a 99 per cent pass rate for the fourth year running. An Ofsted report in June 2007 said that learners' achievements and progress remain outstanding and well above national averages.

Awards: In 2006, it received the Queen's Anniversary Prize for Further and Higher Education for "educational provision in an urban context: raising achievement and aspiration". Ann Clynch, who has been principal since 2000, was awarded the CBE in 2007 in recognition of her services



to further education. psychology, sociology and art including fine art, photography, textiles and graphics.

to further education.

Best subjects: A good all-rounder, the college is exceptional at

Spiritual development: The college is part of the Loreto family of schools and colleges with its key values of freedom, justice, sincerity, truth and joy. These derive from the educational philosophy of Mary Ward, who founded the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto sisters) 400 years ago. Every student has to attend a one-hour, Gospel-centred RE lesson each week. Attendance at a weekly assembly on a spiritual or moral theme is also compulsory. There are also daily morning prayers and a weekly Mass. Religion is popular as an academic subject with around 170 students currently studying theology and ethics at AS and A2.

Could do better: Efforts are being made to increase the number of students achieving A and B grades at A2 level because numbers achieving these grades are

slightly below average. In 2007, Ofsted said the college should address students' lateness for lessons. Strategies include regularly updating students on their record and letters home to parents for persistent offenders. Punctuality is not helped by heavy traffic through the city centre.

Diocesan comments: Episcopal vicar at the Department for Formation Canon Anthony McBride said: "When you go into the place there is a very special feel; it is Catholic with a capital 'C'; there are people from all creeds who feel at home; it has an atmosphere of belonging. The college is a shining example of what Catholic tertiary education should be. There are lots of signs around the place of the Catholic faith, but it's not forced on people."

Principal's comments: Ann Clynch said: "The staff are talented, committed to the Gospel-centred mission and ethos of the college and very hard working; students are overwhelmingly pleasant, focused and work in harmony with staff; teaching and learning, aimed at raising students' achievements and aspirations in a supportive environment, are valued as essential by everyone; it is very well led and managed at every level."

into incredible resources, generous financial aid packages, and regular visits from presidents and prime ministers.

One of the real strengths of Harvard Divinity School is the sheer range of courses which students are able to take. In fact, the curriculum here is so flexible that students can even “cross-register” for courses at other Harvard schools. I tried my hand at Harvard Business School shortly after beginning my degree. The people I met there were more than happy to engage with a diverse range of perspectives – they recognised the value of doing so. I would hesitate before saying the same of Harvard Divinity School.

Harvard is liberal, sometimes aggressively so. Its learning environment is highly politicised, which sometimes has the unfortunate consequence of stifling the free exchange of ideas. For instance, in the case of a sensitive issue like that of gay marriage, anyone in class who dares to offer an argument against it can expect to feel stigmatised and excluded from the discussion. I take issue with this less for political reasons and more for educational ones: surely one of the first priorities for any institute of higher learning is actively to encourage a diversity of viewpoints in the classroom. What is more, it's simply not realistic to try to insulate ourselves from arguments with which we disagree. Nevertheless, at Harvard Divinity School, the academy (to its discredit) often acts as a repository for the polarisation of wider American society.

The Catholic Church receives a particularly raw deal. Recently, a lecturer in one class claimed (I am paraphrasing) that “the dogmatic absolutism of the Catholic Church is responsible for millions of deaths around the world”, and that the Church “routinely does violence to women's bodies” and is “homophobic”. When I tried, respectfully, to suggest another way of looking at things, I was shouted down.

It is not so much the relative frequency with which I encounter such arguments here that worries me, but rather the ease with which they are allowed to go uncriticised and is accepted as the norm. Such was never the case at Cambridge.

Nevertheless, Catholic students at Harvard are fortunate enough to be members of a wonderful and vibrant university Catholic chaplaincy. In particular, the Sunday morning liturgy is breathtaking, with a world-famous boy choir (one of only a small number in the whole of North America). My thoughts, upon discovering this beacon of light amid an at times quite hostile academic environment, were well summed up by the school's motto (taken from Psalm 71): *Repleatur os meum laude tua* – “My mouth shall be filled with your praise”.

■ Simon Hull is studying for a Master of Theological Studies degree at Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

NICHOLAS PYKE

‘Why not bring the great GCSE pantomime to a close?’



Much as they profess to admire Catholic and Anglican schools, government ministers tend to disregard what the Churches and their agencies actually think or say. Churchgoers have played a major part in building and running the British school system. For that matter, they helped build the Labour Party too, but that seems to count for little when their views are awkward or inconvenient.

Church opinions are particularly unwelcome when they seem to suggest that what happens outside the classroom is more important than the small portion of children's time in the control of teachers and, by extension, Whitehall. As Ed Balls, the Schools Secretary, put it only recently – in a strange disinterring of the 1997 mantra – poverty is no excuse for failure.

So, there is little chance of Mr Balls acknowledging the complaints of the Revd Steve Chalke. Well known as a charismatic and frequently outspoken Baptist minister, Mr Chalke also happens to run nine of the Government's city academies, the privately sponsored state schools that the government hopes will rescue inner-city education. His views on the topic might be expected to matter. Indeed, through the charity he heads, the Oasis Trust, he is aiming to run no fewer than 25 academies.

Yet, in direct contradiction of Mr Balls, Mr Chalke is insisting that his schools are subject to the same statistical truths as others. And that academies are not, therefore, the miracle cure that government ministers have been claiming. Among other things, Mr Chalke has no confidence that his Academies will hit the basic GCSE target (which is 30 per cent of pupils attaining five GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and maths) because he is dealing with pupils who have multiple disadvantages.

It is not for want of effort, enthusiasm or even optimism, as Mr Balls rather insultingly seems to imply. As he puts it: “We can all find the story of some kid who was brought up in an East End dump, whose father was an alcoholic... but who's now at Oxford.

The point is he's just one, and there are 10,000 others from his background who have failed.”

You might think it would be harder to ignore “A Good Childhood”, another Church-sponsored initiative, published on Monday (see *News from Britain and Ireland*, page 37). But there is every sign that it, too, will be shunned. Endorsed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the report is a two-year study produced by the Children's Society, an offshoot of the Church of England. Little of what it has to say is new or surprising: we need, in brief, to work fewer hours, be less acquisitive and spend more time with our children. But commonsensical as it may be, the report shines an uncomfortable light on the way society is organised and will be swept aside. The report's message for schools is, in contrast, an open goal. Even the Government accepts that the obsessive testing regime must be brought within the bounds of reason. Indeed, it is in the process of dismantling it.

SATs tests, already collapsing under the weight of their own absurdity, need no further comment. But here is another suggestion, one that requires no unpleasant self-sacrifice on the part of adult voters, just a huge financial saving. Why not bring the great GCSE pantomime to a close? Consuming pots of money and a crucial two-years of teenage development, they serve as a huge blockage in the secondary school system. They are neither sophisticated enough for academic children, nor sufficiently focused for the more practically minded.

The argument for retaining them has been that it is important to give school leavers the chance of a recognised and respected qualification. Yet it is no longer well regarded, thanks to grade inflation; and the school-leaving age has effectively been raised. Not only are there no jobs for 16-year-olds, the legislation has now been passed ensuring that in the coming years full-time education will be compulsory up until the age of 18.

Aside from saving time and money, scrapping GCSEs would have the practical benefit of freeing up time for secondary education. There is no reason why A-level, diploma or apprenticeship preparations could not start a year earlier, or why time could not be found for lessons beyond the borders of the examination timetable.

By all means keep a handful of core examinations for 16-year-olds – in, say, English, maths, science and a modern language. But why take 12?

In the past few years the existence and value of Catholic schools has become a matter for heated public discussion. It is not at all clear why this is the case. It may be simply a lack of understanding of their role and purposes or, possibly, evidence of an increasingly aggressive secular ideology.

Some argue that religious belief is an irrational delusion, inimical to a liberal society and, consequently, harmful to individuals and the integrity of the state. This argument claims that religion is a major cause of war and conflict. Others, less dramatically, argue that religious belief and practice, and therefore religious education, should not have any place in the public affairs of a secular liberal society. Claims are also made that religious-based education must involve indoctrination and thus should not be allowed in any educational system.

People object to Catholic schools on the grounds that they erode social cohesion or enhance social division, deny social justice for atheists or those of minority non-Christian faiths and get unjustified privileged financial support from the Government. The most recent objection is that Catholic schools are only acceptable if they do not give preference in admissions to baptised Catholics. This stance only makes sense, in my view, if one regards schools as being primarily for the purposes of the state – however well intentioned they may be.

The Government's education policies should ensure the greatest possible freedom for parents to have their children educated in accordance with their own philosophical and religious beliefs while maintaining the stability of the state and protecting people from harm. Those who oppose the idea of a state monopoly in education believe that society should value pluralism and, therefore, encourage parents to pass on their culture to their children by choosing the most appropriate school. The potential dilemma arising from providing diversity in choices of schools might be a decreasing sense of identification with the nation state, so making a state-maintained education less acceptable to tax payers.

However, it does not seem realistic to argue that the educational aspirations of

Schools in the secular firing line

The Catholic Church maintains that its schools benefit not only those who attend them but society as a whole. This view, says **Andrew B. Morris**, needs to be upheld now more strongly than ever

the religiously committed can be satisfied by a school, or by any syllabus, that only teaches children about religion as a social phenomenon. Simply learning about differing forms of religious behaviour and worship is not the same as experiencing religious life. Furthermore, if, in trying to be culturally neutral, schools present religious behaviour without criticism or approval, little respect is being given to the particular religious practice of pupils or of their parents. Indeed, it may be that by using such an approach schools are stopping children exploring the experience they have at home.

Genuine respect for religious beliefs and practices requires that their real characters are recognised and accepted on their own terms in a positive manner. This implies more than simply allowing them to exist. Proper respect would be marked by the state providing mechanisms that enable communities wishing to educate their children in a relevant religious cultural environment to do so. That represents the position of governments since 1870.

Religious groups, including the Catholic Church, however, go beyond a minimal request for respect and have long argued that religion has an intrinsic value, not just for individuals, families and communities, but also for the state. Yet, paradoxically, even if such claims are true, the teaching and practice of a specific religion in state-controlled schools is hard to defend because, almost by definition, a pluralist state should not impose religious doctrine.

If a pluralist society is one where a variety of cultures and belief systems are accepted, then it is impossible to imagine a monopolistic school system that can do justice to all those varied systems at the same time. Diversity, therefore, appears unavoidable.

That does not imply that religious communities should have an absolute right to state support to help them establish their own schools. Society has the right to prohibit educational activities if these can be shown to be harmful. Thus, if a community group wishes to create a school for teaching terrorist techniques or inculcating aggressively racist attitudes, or if children are deprived of basic educational needs because of an overemphasis on religious activities, the state has the right to intervene in the interests both of the children and of the wider society.

In England, there is no evidence to show that Catholic or other established church schools are educationally or socially harmful. Indeed, the consideration of parental rights and the argument for the inseparability of culture and religion suggests that there are solid socio-political and educational grounds for supporting religious-based schools provided that their ends and means are not unreasonable.

A formulation arrived at by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales in 1928 holds true now as it did then: "Precisely the same facilities of education should be given to those who regard definite religious teaching as an essential part of education as to those who attach no such importance to teaching of that character."

To deny Catholic schools access to state support, or to insist that a condition for receiving that support is that they must not give priority of admission to baptised Catholic pupils, seems, to me, to be highly contentious, illiberal and just a little perverse. Unless, of course, one subscribes to the view that the socio-political aspirations of the state should always prevail over those of its citizens.

■ **Andrew B. Morris** is director of the Centre for Christian Education at Liverpool Hope University and author of *Fifty Years On: the case for Catholic schools* (Matthew James Publishing Ltd, £14.95)

The Oxford University Theology Summer School

26 July – 8 August 2009
at Christ Church, Oxford



A two-week residential programme for clergy, theologians, teachers of religious education and lay people with an interest in theological study at university level

- Exploring the theme "Creation and Creativity"
- Seminars taught by members of Oxford's Theology Faculty, distinguished theologians and prominent church people including Keith Ward, Henry Wansbrough and Philip Sheldrake
- Plenary keynote lectures given by leading scholars in the field

For further details please email iptheo@conted.ox.ac.uk (quoting ref TAB) or see <http://international.conted.ox.ac.uk>