

**From:** Mike Hocking [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** 10 June 2019 05:03  
**To:** Planning [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Application number 2019/2375/P

To whom it may concern,

I'm writing this letter in support of the plan to have Abacus Belsize Primary School located in the Hampstead Police Station, 26 Rosslyn Hill.

The main objections to the school are supposedly the traffic, and the associated air pollution it would create; the cost of the building; and the fact that other schools in Camden are underutilized. There is also, apparently, an unspoken concern about the negative impact it would have on proximal property values, which seems to be the more likely cause for complaints.

The surprising thing about this entire debate is the opposition to something that should make the neighbourhood flourish. The parents of Abacus students are often multilingual, well-educated professionals, a number of whom are expatriates who have been sought out by London-based employers and moved to the city for their expertise. The families that aren't British already are gaining citizenship and laying down roots for themselves and their families. These families have come to Belsize Park because it is safe, children-friendly, it is close to numerous parks and there is a large network of young families. As many commentators have already stated, these families want to have their kids attend a school in their community, they do not want to drive them to a school outside of their neighbourhood. These families are the same people that are customers at the local shops, cafes, restaurants and pubs in Belsize and Hampstead. They are the families that use the libraries, sports facilities, attend music lessons, pay rent, buy homes and pay large sums of council tax to fund municipal services. They also vote. These are exactly the people that city planners, businesses, schools and residents should want to attract to their neighbourhood; however, if the council can't provide convenient schools, these people, and future prospective residents, will probably look elsewhere. The parents want a convenient school location for their kids, they don't want to walk 30-40 minutes uphill to New End, they want to walk their kids to school in their neighbourhood before starting their commute to work. When Abacus was established six years ago it was done so because of a lack of secular state schools in Belsize: there is currently none. Fitzjohn's Primary, one of the closest secular schools to the ward, but not within Belsize Park, has a great reputation, but it typically only accepts kids within 0.4 mile from its premises. A demand was recognized and Abacus has fulfilled it.

The opposition to Abacus is essentially communicating to these families that they do not want them living in the neighbourhood. It seems as if they are saying we want you to shop locally and pay council tax but we don't want to see or hear your children. If the issue were really about traffic and air pollution, they would be targeting the private schools where there is an obvious problem of out-of-ward (and out-of-borough?) students being driven to school, often in large 4x4 diesel SUVs. Why is there not more of a focus to curb that activity? Why is the focus on Abacus, a school for local residents who live and shop in the local area? Why is the proposed location of Abacus, which is just outside Belsize but still in the centre of Camden, such a problem when the origin of kids in independent schools is unknown but undeniably largely from outside the ward and likely outside NW3? If the residents of Hampstead and Belsize want to deal with the issue of congestion and air quality, they should focus on the actual problem, which is the current independent schools with undefined catchment areas, as opposed to a theoretical problem of a local Abacus student being driven 5 minutes to school, even though the majority of Abacus families don't own cars. I'm sure many Abacus parents and teachers would support more drastic measures like imposing driving taxes around school pick-up and drop-off times for all motorists. The city does have an air-pollution problem, but those reviewing the planning application shouldn't conflate the two issues.

Abacus is a multicultural school with many expatriates and there may be some concern about the school population being transient or the birth rate being too low in Camden to support the current schools. The first point is that Abacus is a school, it has been for 6 years and it is significantly oversubscribed. The reality is London is a cosmopolitan city that is a global centre for business. While parts of Camden may have low birth rates, Belsize Park is teeming with young families, as is

obvious by oversubscribed reception classes, family-focussed cafes and local parks heaving with kids. Some of these kids are born outside of the country and are not captured by local birth statistics. Some may be concerned that the school is catering to a transient populations. As stated above many of these families are becoming British citizens and are planning to stay permanently and, unless the council has an extremely pessimistic outlook about the City of London, and business in general, this area will always draw on skilled foreign workers. Belsize Park, similar to St. John's Wood, has convenient London Underground access to the City of London and Canary Warf, as well as the developing business centre at King's Cross and hence will always attract skilled workers with young families. But make no mistake, London is one of the most expensive cities in the world and Camden isn't a cheap place to live. When families move here they have to consider the cost of living as well as the cost of schools: they may be able to afford to live in NW3, but they may not be able to afford both housing and private school fees.

Currently the kids of Abacus cannot walk to school, they are bussed to the temporary location at King's Cross, which means more diesel emissions than if the school were within walking distance to the ward. Furthermore, if kids from Abacus were distributed to other school across the borough, as suggested by some people, this would create more of a need to have kids driven to school. Abacus is a well-established school. Those reviewing the planning application should not forget that these kids will need to go somewhere and if Abacus isn't within a walking distance to Belsize Park, then this will create more traffic and congestion problems.

Finally, the cost of the building seems to be a red herring. The building is a public building that will stay as a public building. The government didn't buy it from a developer; rather, the building was sold from one government department to another.

Abacus has established itself as an exceptional school; the community should embrace it and its new location. Residents and council planners should be overjoyed that a long abandoned building will soon house an extraordinary group of children, teachers and school employees. The school and its children will be a breath of fresh air on the High Street, not a cloud of diesel exhaust.

Sincerely,

Michael Hocking

