

From The Times
July 10, 2007

Catholic school shuns pupil called Hell

Bernard Lagan in Sydney

A Catholic school refused to enroll a five-year-old because his surname was Hell. St Peter Apostle School in Melbourne suggested that Max Hell would only be admitted if he used his mother's maiden name. His father initially agreed. But when it came to signing the enrolment forms Alex Hall decided to stand firm in defence of his family's name. "We're quite devastated by the whole thing," Mr Hell, a Catholic father of three said on Monday.

"After everything that has happened with the Catholic Church, you would think that they would embrace me as an individual. So what if I've got a name like Hell? That's my family history and my name." Mr Hell, 45, who is of Austrian heritage, said his surname meant light or bright in German. "It's 2007, not 1407 - it's not the Dark Ages."

The Hells approached St Peter Apostle School hoping to transfer their son from a state school, apparently because he was being bullied over his surname. St Peter Apostle agreed it would receive the boy on condition that he adopt his mother's maiden name of Wembridge. But Mr Hell told Michael McGrath, the principal of the school, that it was an unacceptable demand and that he would look elsewhere to continue his son's education. Mr Hell said he was told that by refusing to change the surname he was "making a rod for his son's back."

Said Mr Hell: "It is Hell. That's our name, it's our heritage. It's who he is and if he wants to change his name at 18 then that's up to him." "We are victims of our name," Mr Hell said.

After Mr Hell publicly complained about the school's refusal to enroll his son, the school yesterday had a change of heart. In a statement, St Peter the Apostle School said young Max Hell was welcome to attend classes and leave his existing school where there were "a range of matters impacting on the child."

The school's statement said: "The issue of a change of surname for the child was an initiative of the parents which they believed would assist the child in the transition of schools." After discussions between the parish priest and the principal, St Peter the Apostle school had agreed to enroll Max, the school's statement said. It added: "The school is working with the family in the best interests of the child."

The family claimed St Peter changed its position only after they complained through the media. "The school has turned around and has said Max can go there," said Mr Hell. "But why would you want to go there after being victimized?" Mr Hell, who said he was also bullied because of his surname when he attended a Catholic school as a child, said he was now reluctant to consider a Catholic education for his children.

"I've had enough. I was ridiculed as a child... I want him to be accepted as Max Hell, but obviously he's not," he said.