

Educate Together

Submission to the Department of Education and Skills on the role of denominational religion in the school admissions process

Synopsis

- I. Educate Together is an independent NGO that has been campaigning for the rights of all children to equality of access and esteem in Irish schools for the last 40 years. Over this period it has built a network of 94 equality and human-rights based schools.
- II. It is Educate Together's view that all children should be able to apply for enrolment in any state-funded school, irrespective of religious, social or cultural background. State-funded schools should be open to all. The characteristic spirit of a school should not be dependent on the homogeneity of its student population, nor should children be beholden to a religious institution for acceptance to a school. As such, Educate Together calls for an end to religious discrimination in state-funded schools.
- III. There is no doubt that the 'baptism barrier' is an affront to the rights of families around the country, and lessening its impact will provide places for children who would otherwise be prohibited from attending their local school. However, it is Educate Together's position that simply removing this barrier will not solve the problem of parents of minority religion or no religion having very little choice in the ethos of the school in which their children will spend their formative years.
- IV. Equally important is providing families with a school option that does not 'other' non-religious or minority religious children within the school day. Educate Together's equality-based model provides this, and there is an urgent need for the Government to respond to the ever-growing demand for this model of education.
- V. If the Government is serious about making the Irish education system more inclusive, then it should focus on providing both equal access to schools and equal respect within schools for all children. A national network of Educate Together schools, which welcome and cherish all children, is what is needed - this will truly serve the common good.
- VI. Educate Together has welcomed the commitments in the Programme for Government to increase non-denominational and multi-denominational schools to 400 by 2030. Genuine choice of school type that is compatible with the constitutional and human rights of all families in Ireland can only be achieved if equality-based schools such as those provided under the Educate Together model are available all over Ireland.

Option one: Catchment area

All children should have access to their local school and be educated amongst their friends and neighbours if they so wish. However, in view of the over-supply of denominational schools and the scarcity of Educate Together schools it would be unfair to limit children to a catchment area that may only offer denominational education. Catchments are already imposed on new schools opening since 2011. This predominantly effects Educate Together schools and impacts with our ability to provide badly needed diversity of choice to families- many of whom are excluded by denominational schools via the baptism barrier. Therefore, Educate Together opposes enrolment policies based solely on catchment areas until such a time as there is choice in each catchment area.

The consultation paper states: 'properly-drafted exemptions will be needed to make provision for Gaelscoileanna and special schools'. It is not clear whether this refers to Gaelscoileanna or special schools with religious patronage or ethos, or all Gaelscoileanna or special schools. If this option were to be progressed, it should be done in such a way as to prohibit religious schools from giving preference to children of their own religion over children who do not have that background - regardless of the language medium or special status of the school. It is not clear why such schools should be permitted exemptions.

The reference to exemptions raises a concern that catchment area requirements might be imposed on all schools, rather than only those with religious ethos. Clearly since these changes are aimed specifically at reducing discrimination against children from minority religious backgrounds, there would be no reason to extend any catchment area limits beyond schools with religious patrons. Given the severely limited availability of Educate Together schools at this time, and the resulting necessity of travel for families seeking Educate Together school places, the imposition of catchment areas on such schools would reduce, rather than increase access for parents from minority religious backgrounds. Any changes should ensure that this does not happen as an unintended consequence.

Option two: Nearest school rule

Allowing a school to favour one child over another constitutes unfair discrimination regardless of the distance the children live from the school. While this option may reduce slightly the number of children from non-religious and minority-religious backgrounds experiencing such discrimination, the impact on each child who is discriminated against is the same.

Option three: Quota system

It is Educate Together's view that enforcing this provision will only continue to enforce discrimination and exclusion within the Irish school system. Providing for access for a number of children from minority religious backgrounds without removing the integration of religious instruction throughout the school day, and ensuring provision of alternative objective, critical and pluralist religious or ethical education, this would continue the situation where children are exposed to indoctrination throughout the school day.

Implementing a 'quota' system of children that are allowed access to a State-funded school is tokenistic. It is inconceivable that small children should be categorised in this way and enrolled on this basis just so they be 'tolerated' in a school whose ethos may be at odds with their cultural or religious background. Therefore Educate Together vehemently opposes this system.

Option four: Outright prohibition

It is Educate Together's view that the preferred option out of those listed is option 4. Only the complete repeal of Section 7 (3)(c) of the Equal Status Act, in conjunction with a provision in the current Education Bill that ensures that no state-funded school be allowed to discriminate against children for reasons of religious, cultural or social background, should be the basis of any effort to remove discrimination from the Irish education system.

However, the suggestion that families might be forced to sign an 'agreement' with the ethos of the school compromises the beliefs of non-religious families, and must not be permitted. It is abhorrent to suggest that parents 'sign a disclaimer' that states they understand and support the ethos of a school that they may only be sending their children to because they lack an alternative. This 'clause' may undermine any claim those parents may have if their children are not provided with adequate 'opt-out' activities. The characteristic spirit of a school should not be dependent on the homogeneity of its student population and it is Educate Together's view that all children should be allowed to enrol in any state-funded school throughout Ireland, irrespective of religious, social or cultural background.

An independent state enrolment authority:

1. Educate Together is proposing a system whereby an independent state authority writes to all parents of school entry age the year before their children are due to enter school to seek their preference of school and school type. The state can then know the current state of school preference in an area and ensure that state resources and buildings are allocated to meet this demand. The independent state authority overseeing this process should be managed independently of school patrons to ensure that the process is fair, transparent, and equal and to avoid potential conflicts of interest.
2. Educate Together has been proposing a solution to this issue for a number of years. A proper state-led system to find out parental preference would allow the state to know the real levels of demand for different school types and to allocate buildings and resources accordingly. The current difficulty is that schools are only aware of their own enrolment applications.
3. In the Lucan area, a densely-populated Dublin suburb, Educate Together schools have taken the initiative and are piloting an area-based common enrolment process to address this problem. We recognise that this is only a partial solution and a more systemic state-based system is required.
4. Benefits to such a system:
 - 4.1. It will also allow the state to impose transparent criteria that are consistent with social policy and equality legislation.
 - 4.2. This would remove the responsibility for enrolments from individual schools
 - 4.3. The authority could allocate places to schools of differing types according to this register

- 4.4. This body could also be empowered to bring local school management and patrons together on an annual basis to discuss changing demand and any arising issues such as trends towards social, ability, religious or cultural polarisation between schools
- 4.5. It would also take the pressure away from school principals and boards of management who would be freed from any allegation of unfair preference in their enrolments.
- 4.6. This could minimise social segregation in the school population.

Supporting documents

- I. Educate Together's submission "on a Regulatory Framework for Enrolment October 2011" is available here: http://www.educatetogether.ie/sites/default/files/patronage_forum_submission.pdf
- II. Educate Together's "Submission to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism" is available here: http://www.educatetogether.ie/sites/default/files/20111028_submission-on-enrolment_0.pdf

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