

How can primary schools make all children feel included and involved?

Parents, we would like to hear what you think



The Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn TD, would like you to tell him how you think we can make sure that the rights and beliefs of children and families from various cultural and religious backgrounds are respected in our primary schools.

How do I tell you my views?

You can send us your views by email or by post. You will find our contact details at the end of this leaflet. You have until **Friday 22 November 2013** to contact us.

How are Irish primary schools currently organised?

Most (96%) primary schools in Ireland are owned by religious patrons. 90% of these schools are owned by and are under the patronage of the Catholic Church.

A patron is involved in setting up a school and supporting the school's Board of Management in its day-to-day work. For many years religious orders and local parishes were very involved in setting up and running schools in Ireland and this is how many schools are under religious patronage. These patrons often gave land for schools to use and made contributions to the costs of building and running schools.

What impact does a changing Irish society have on our schools?

We all know that Irish society has changed a lot in recent years. There are now families of many different religions, beliefs and nationalities living here. Our education system needs to adapt to make sure that, as well as continuing to cater for traditional religious beliefs (for example, children from Catholic or Protestant families), there is respect for all the different traditions and religions from which pupils now come.

What about areas where there is only one local school?

Outside urban areas, children generally go to their local school, which is often a school owned by, and under the patronage of, the Catholic Church.

There are about 1,700 of these primary schools, which are not located close to any other primary school. This means that they need to cater for the full range of traditions, religions and beliefs in their local communities. One of the challenges for these schools is to strike the right balance to ensure that the religious beliefs of all children in the local community are respected.

What can be done to help the current system adapt?

One option is to look at the possibility of transferring some schools run by the Catholic Church to other school patron bodies. Work is already underway with the Catholic Church in selected areas to see how this can best be done. However, many schools will continue to be run by the Catholic Church and they will need to cater for pupils of various traditions, religions and beliefs. This consultation process is about hearing the views of the people affected on how these schools, while continuing to cater for children from Catholic families, can also cater for children of other traditions, religions and beliefs.

What has been done so far?

In 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills set up an expert group to consult with people and make recommendations about how primary schools can become more inclusive of different:

- traditions;
- religions; and
- beliefs.

The report of this expert group is available on the Department of Education and Skills website at [link](#). It is called the **Report of the Advisory Group to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector**.

The expert group made more than 50 recommendations and the Minister has already decided to implement some of these.

What recommendations are being implemented?

The Minister has started a new process to look at transferring some schools run by the Catholic Church to other school patron bodies in 28 areas around the country. The first step in this process involved asking all the parents of pre-school children and primary school-going children in 43 areas to tell us what type of school they would like their children to attend. Parental demand for change emerged in 28 of the areas surveyed and these are the areas where the Minister is seeking to have school buildings transferred to other school patron bodies.

We also dealt with demand for Irish-medium schools in these surveys. You can find more detail on the outcome of the surveys on our website www.education.ie.

The Minister has also asked for a new primary school subject to be developed. It will teach children about ethics and give them knowledge about various religions and beliefs.

What else is being done?

In addition to the above, we need to make sure that all schools and particularly local schools which cater for entire communities are inclusive of pupils of all traditions, religions and beliefs as well as catering for children of traditional religious beliefs. The Government intends to publish a White Paper setting out their policy on how to do this. That is why the Minister is now asking for your views and what you think of the expert group's recommendations.

Views of the expert group

The expert group suggested that the best way to make sure that the views of all those involved in running and attending schools are taken into account is if schools, working with the Department of Education and Skills, parents and communities, develop good, clear policies and practices which show that they respect the rights of all children in their school.

The expert group suggested that schools address the following issues:

Enrolment

Schools should have clear and fair enrolment policies so that parents know how places in the school will be allocated. This is important when there are not enough places for all of the children who want to enrol in the school.

Respecting the right to ‘opt out’ of religion class

Schools need to:

- respect a parent’s right to have their child opt out of religion class; and
- make appropriate provision for children while the religion class is taking place.

While some schools are already dealing effectively and sensitively with these issues, concerns have been expressed about how some schools cater for children whose parents do not want them to take part in religion class. Some people have suggested that schools could change the school timetable to have religious education provided at the start or end of the school day to make it easier for children who do not take part in religion class.

Ethics and education about religion and beliefs

Schools need to make sure that all children are taught about ethics and about different religions and beliefs. The new primary school subject mentioned earlier will help schools do this.

Preparation time for religious sacraments

Sometimes schools spend a lot of time during the school day preparing children for religious sacraments such as First Holy Communion. The expert group was concerned that this can mean that children do not spend as much time as they should learning subjects like Maths and English. They recommended that time spent in school on preparing children for such religious sacraments should not reduce the amount of time that children have to learn other subjects.

Already in some areas, parents and the parish are taking on a greater role in preparing children for First Holy Communion which means less time needs to be spent on this during the school day and the expert group suggest this should be built on in discussions with parents and clergy.

Celebrating religious holidays

Some schools already celebrate religious holidays and festivals from different world cultures as well as the more traditional Irish holidays like St Patrick's Day, Easter and Christmas.

The expert group recommended that schools should have a written policy on religious and cultural celebrations. This would make sure that celebrations:

- include all children;
- are educational; and
- respect the differing traditions of the children in the schools.

Statues and symbols

Some schools have a variety of religious and cultural pictures, statues and symbols on display in corridors, classrooms and halls. The expert group suggested that these should, in a balanced way, reflect the beliefs and cultures of all children who attend the school. This should be part of a school's policy and the importance of the different displays and pictures should be explained to the children.

Assemblies and prayers

The school policy should also deal with how school assemblies and communal prayers, where they take place, can be respectful of the beliefs and cultures of all children in the school.

School board of management

There are generally eight people on a primary school board of management, including two parents, two community representatives and two people nominated by the patron of the school. The expert group suggested that the board of management should reflect the diversity in the local community.

Complaints and appeals

The expert group recommended that all schools should have clear, easy-to-follow procedures for complaints and appeals for parents to use if they think the school has not respected their child's rights. The group stated that, with proper procedures in place, it should be possible to resolve most complaints at school level. However, they also recommended the development of an effective statutory appeals system that could be used by parents.

Tell us your views

We welcome your views on the issues raised in this leaflet. They will help in the preparation of a White Paper which will spell out Government policy on making sure primary schools are inclusive of the whole community. You can get more information about this process on our website at [link](#).

What do you think of the expert group suggestions?

We would like to hear what you think of the suggestions made by the expert group. Do you think these are the right way forward? Or do you have concerns about any of the recommendations which you would like to tell us about?

Can you tell us about a school that is good at being inclusive?

Some local schools already do a good job in catering for children from different cultural, religious and belief traditions. So as part of this consultation we would also like to hear from parents and other interested parties on how this is done well in schools.

Have you any other suggestions?

We would also welcome your views on any other changes which could be made in local schools to make them more inclusive and welcoming places for all children from the local community.

Please send us your views by **Friday 22 November 2013**:

- by email to cpu@education.gov.ie or
- by post to Central Policy Unit
Department of Education and Skills
Block 2, Floor 1
Marlborough Street Dublin
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**Department of Education and Skills
September 2013**