

# The Case for Catholic Schools

A response to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector



# Introduction

In April, The Minister for Education and Skills, Mr Ruairi Quinn, launched the 'Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector'.

The purpose of the Forum is to determine how many Catholic-run primary schools there should be in the future, and to work out the most orderly mechanism for the handing over of Catholic schools to new patron bodies.

Minister Quinn has said he envisages perhaps half of Catholic primary schools being given to other patron bodies. On the other hand, Fr Michael Drumm of the Catholic Schools Partnership has said he envisages a figure more in the region of 10 percent.

However, whatever the number turns out to be, there is a great need to once again make the case for Catholic schools and to respond to some of the common criticisms made of them. That is the purpose of this short document.



## Why Catholic schools? (The principle of parental choice)

**THE OVERRIDING** reason for Catholic schools is, of course, to provide schools to the Catholic community that have as their aim assisting parents in passing on their faith to their children, in addition to providing an excellent all-round education.

This recognises that schools are first and foremost a response to the wishes of parents. It recognises that parents are the primary educators of their children and in this regard the State must be the servant, not the master. That is, rather than the State providing children with the education the State thinks is best for them, the State endeavours to enable parents to send their children to a school that best reflects the parents' own beliefs and ethos.

## Catholic schools provide a good education

We have no figures from Ireland that compare the performance of Catholic with other types of schools. One reason for this is that the overwhelming majority of primary schools here are Catholic.

However, in other countries such as the UK, where Catholic schools are in the minority, such comparisons can and have been made and Catholic schools typically outperform State-run schools, on average. This is proven by official Government data.

In the UK, on average, Catholic schools outperform State schools both in terms of education standards and in terms of the personal development and well-being of pupils. (The relevant information can be found in a publication called 'Value Added: The Distinctive Contribution of Catholic Schools and Colleges in England' which is downloadable from the internet).

Other denominational schools also outperform State schools, on average.

## Catholic schools are inclusive

It is commonly said that one reason Catholic and other denominational schools outperform their State counterparts is because they 'cherry-pick' the best pupils. However, this is not borne out by the evidence either in Ireland or Britain.

The above-mentioned report, 'Value Added', drawing on official data, shows that there are a higher percentage of children from minority backgrounds, or with special education needs, in Catholic schools than in State schools.

In Ireland, a report by the Department of Education dated November 2007 called 'Audit of school enrolment policies by Regional Offices Service' found that Catholic primary schools had more than their fair share of children from minority and disadvantaged background.

## A Department of Education report from 2007 found that Catholic schools are socially inclusive.

For example, it found that in many areas Catholic schools had higher percentages of children from non-Irish backgrounds than other schools.

With regard to children with special needs, Catholic schools also proved more inclusive than other schools. For example, in the cohort of schools in provincial cities, Catholic primary schools which enrolled 600 to 650 pupils, over 34 per cent of pupils enrolled were special needs children. This compared to an average of 15 per cent enrolled in other schools in the same cohort.



# Denominational schools in many countries receive public funding.

## State-funding of denominational schools is common internationally

State-funding of denominational schools happens in many countries. All that is unusual in Ireland in this regard is the sheer number of Catholic primary schools. But the receipt of State-funding is not at all unusual.

Again to cite the example of England, a third of its State-funded primary schools are faith-based. They are run mainly by the Church of England but 10pc are run by the Catholic Church.

The American system, which denies any State-funding to religious schools, is, in fact, quite unusual and one reason it is unusual is that it takes no account of the principle of parental choice.

## Catholic schools, human rights and religious freedom

It is now often claimed that religious schools violate the rights of pupils who do not belong to the faith of the school because the school day is permeated with the ethos of the school, and therefore such pupils may be 'indoctrinated'.

It is claimed that it is not enough for parents of such pupils to be able to opt them out of religion class because religion (e.g. school prayers) can touch on other aspects of the school day.

A recent document from the Irish Human Rights Commission called 'Religion and Education: A Human Rights Perspective' warns against "indoctrination" or "proselytism" by denominational schools. It does not define these terms. It even warns against "inadvertent indoctrination or proselytism".

It cites various international human rights treaties to buttress its argument.

However, the document stresses freedom *from* religion very much at the expense of freedom *of* religion. It does not give sufficient recognition to the right of faith communities to establish schools which cater to the children of those communities. This is an essential part of freedom of religion.

If those schools must heavily restrict the expression of their ethos in order not to "indoctrinate" (a very loaded term) pupils who do not belong to the faith of the school, then that would amount to an attack on the freedom of religion of those schools and the communities they serve.

In addition, the Irish Human Rights Commission exaggerates the extent to which international law backs up its case. This is made clear in a document called 'Religion, Education and Human Rights' released by The Iona Institute last year and available on our website.

## The future of Catholic schools: where to from here?

Everyone recognises that there are now too many Catholic schools for the true level of demand for them today. It is precisely the principle of parental choice which demands that a greater diversity of schools be made available to parents and their children on a nationwide basis.

However, the outstanding question is exactly how many Catholic schools should be given over to other patron bodies in order to meet the demand for greater school diversity.

That number will depend to a very large extent on the willingness of priests, religious and lay-people to make the positive case for Catholic schools and to demonstrate their support for them. This document is an attempt to encourage this process.

**THE IONA INSTITUTE** promotes the place of marriage and religion in society. We defend the continued existence of publicly-funded denominational schools. We also promote freedom of conscience and religion.

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