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No response from minister to multifaith school plans

EDUCATE Together has heard nothing but silence from the Department of Education for four months in response to an application to open second-level schools — despite a growing demand from parents.

The organisation is already patron to 44 multidenominational primary schools with about 8,700 pupils, and will open a dozen more this autumn.

Following interest from parents at many of its primary schools, Educate Together wrote to then education minister Mary Hanafin last December seeking approval to register as a second level patron.

Representatives met Department of Education officials in February and sent them the necessary information in mid-March but they have heard nothing back from the department since then.

A feasibility study by Trinity College Dublin's school of education found more than nine-in-10 parents of Educate Together primary pupils would send their children to an Educate Together second level school.

“We have made countless efforts to contact the department for an update but there has been no response, not even an acknowledgement,” said Educate Together second level project manager Emer Nowlan.

“We have a duty to support the parents campaigning for this.”

There is strong demand in Waterford and in north and west Dublin, particularly around Lucan where 250 pupils complete their primary education at five local Educate Together schools each year.

The Department of Education said last night that the question of recognising additional patron bodies at second level is being considered in the context of Educate Together’s request.

“The issue of patronage for a school is generally considered when a time-scale for the provision of the school has been established,” a spokesperson said.

The Trinity survey of more than 400 parents at five Educate Together schools, to be published tonight, highlights a strong desire for a school with a good balance between academic achievement and pupils’ social and emotional development.

Other vital ethos factors were that a school should listen to the concerns of parents and deal appropriately with bullying incidences. All parents placed strong emphasis on a school having a diverse range of pupils from different social classes

and ethnic backgrounds, and deal appropriately with any incidences of racism.

Growing demand for schools with non-church patronage has prompted the Department of Education to plan three multi-denominational primary schools in September under the patronage of Co Dublin Vocational Education Committee. The model will be extended around the country to cater for children of all faiths and no faith.