

Community National Schools

An Educate Together Position Paper - January 2016

Educate Together has its foundations in the movement for multi-denominational education which began in 1978. In the intervening years, the movement has evolved and matured into the organisation that today is patron of 77 equality-based national schools and four second-level schools in Ireland. Constant demand for more schools and over-subscription rates in many existing schools suggests that our model of education is one that has responded successfully to the changes in Irish society over the last 38 years.

For many years, Educate Together has expressed its hopes for State input in Irish primary education. In 2006, for example, Educate Together initiated talks with Education and Training Boards Ireland (the ETBI - formerly the IVEA) on how Educate Together could work in partnership with Ireland's ETBs (formerly VECs) to increase the availability of equality-based primary schools in Ireland.

In 2007, the Government ventured into greater involvement in the education sector, and the Community National School (CNS) model was devised. This new model of primary school was set up under the patronage of Ireland's ETBs. The stated rationale for CNS schools when they first opened, as expressed by the Government at the time, was to address the widespread demand for alternatives to the predominant religious-run school model which accounts for over 96% of the primary education sector.¹ From the outset, the ethos of the CNS school model was to be one of inclusiveness and respect for all beliefs, both religious and non-religious.² Initially Educate Together enthusiastically welcomed this initiative and attempted to contribute to the development of the model.

However, there are now 11 Community National Schools in Ireland, run by local ETBs. Educate Together has some concerns that these schools do not provide a viable alternative to denominational education in Ireland. Educate Together believes that the CNS school model sanctions the **segregation of young children**. Furthermore, Educate Together is concerned that the existing Community National Schools are **not sufficiently transparent**, some of which have been in existence since 2008. There is also uncertainty surrounding the **democratic** nature of the schools.

Therefore, Educate Together offers its perspective and insights based on many years of developing its own model of equality-based education and **proposes a collaboration with the ETBs to circumvent some of the issues that it observes in the CNS model of education.**

¹ <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2007-Press-Releases/PR07-12-13.html>

² <http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/foirecord115.pdf>

The Genesis of the Community National School Model.

The Community National School model, which was first announced in 2007 by then Minister for Education Mary Hanafin TD,³ was developed following consultation with Ireland's education partners and church groups. At these consultations, Educate Together welcomed the beginning of direct State involvement in the provision of primary schools.⁴ However, the resulting Community National School pilot model was one designed and created by the Department of Education, in close partnership with Catholic Church authorities.

Documents released to RTÉ under Freedom of Information have revealed that Catholic bishops, in giving their blessing to the Community National School model, stressed that: *'Religious Instruction and formation of the Catholic children in the faith by a qualified teacher, during the school day would be the minimum non negotiable requirement for a new Multi-Denominational Primary School'*.⁵ This requirement would necessitate the separation of children taking religious formation from the other children in their class.

During the consultation period, representatives of the ETBs raised concerns about such separation, stating that it would lead to *'a segregation of largely native white Catholic children from largely non-white newcomer children on religious grounds'*.⁶ The Church of Ireland Board of Education also raised concerns about segregation, based on the belief that *'this runs counter to the concept of a school providing inclusive education and this is especially difficult where particular groups formed a tiny minority within the total cohort of pupils'*.⁷ Educate Together warned of the *'great difficulties encountered segregating children according to religion for a school committed to delivering equality and respect for all'*.⁸

These concerns were all raised with the Department of Education as far back as 2007. Yet in 2008, Catholic Bishops again reminded the then Minister of *'their wish to be able to assure Catholic parents of pupils in Community National Schools that their children would follow the same religious education programme as in a Catholic school'*.⁹ By 2009, the Government had made a firm commitment *'to meeting the requirements of the Department of Education and Science and the Catholic Church in relation to offering the 'Alive-O' Programme to Catholics'*.¹⁰

Children in Community National Schools were to be segregated during the school day on the basis of religion, in accordance with the wishes of the Catholic Church.

³ <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2007-Press-Releases/PR07-12-13.html>

⁴ <http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/foirecord61.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/foirecord41.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/foirecord115.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/foirecord56.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/foirecord27.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/2008/11/12/bishops-meet-minister-education-science-batt-okeeffe-td/>

¹⁰ <http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/foirecord125.pdf>

The Current Situation

Today, continued Catholic Church support for, and input into, the CNS model of education is clear: recent media reports have suggested that the Catholic Church favours further collaboration with Community National Schools under new partnership agreements, strengthening the link between the Church that dominates Ireland's education system and an outwardly 'State' school.¹¹ This proposal, it has been suggested, would effectively lay the groundwork for a Catholic Church / ETB joint patronage of more national schools in Ireland.¹² This is problematic when it is considered that the very rationale for setting up Community National Schools in 2007 was to address the widespread demand for accessible alternatives to church-run schools.

The current Minister for Education, Jan O'Sullivan TD, believes that the Community National School model is one which should be rolled out to more parts of the country. In a recent address at the ETBI Annual Conference, the Minister stated that *'the Education and Training Boards have a strong offer to bring to the table'* with their CNS model of multi-denominational education.¹³

However, Educate Together argues that supplying true choice of school for Irish families necessitates providing at least one option in which Faith Formation takes place outside school hours (FFOSH). This assessment is based on Educate Together's experience in Irish primary education: from 1978 to the late 1980s, Educate Together also offered Faith Formation Inside School Hours (FFISH) and concluded that it was unworkable, unfair and impractical. In fact, Educate Together schools began to abandon this practice on the basis that the exclusion and isolation of children on the basis of religion was not in keeping with the Educate Together ethos and because teachers were disinclined to 'police religion'.¹⁴

It would be remiss of Educate Together not to share its findings as the time and resources of the ETBs are spent piloting a model that has already been fully tested and rejected by Educate Together. Educate Together believes that together with the ETBs, we could develop a successful and fair collaboration that would benefit families and schools communities throughout Ireland. The next section will explain why Educate Together considers FFOSH is one of the most important bases of a egalitarian school system.

¹¹ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/new-patronage-model-proposed-for-primary-schools-1.2365252>

¹² <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/going-to-college/primary-patronage-could-be-shared-31556674.html>

¹³ <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Speeches/2015-Speeches/SP15%20-%202009-24.html#sthash.gKAXg6OW.dpuf>

¹⁴ See accompanying "FFISH FFOSH Final Report"

Segregation

Faith Formation Inside School Hours (FFISH)

Educate Together is concerned that the Government's policy towards faith formation classes in the current CNS school model does not serve the best interests of all school pupils and presents major difficulties for the State and the teachers working in these schools. Educate Together has valuable insights on this issue based on 38 years of equality-based school management. Our current model was established on 3 core elements:

- a. A defined ethos statement binding all Educate Together schools to deliver equality of access and esteem to children irrespective of their backgrounds. This statement is legally enshrined in the Articles and Memorandum of Association of Educate Together.
- b. The common Ethical Education curriculum delivered during school hours, teaching fundamental personal and social values common to all beliefs. This includes a programme of religious education in which all children explore the main faith systems in the world in an equal manner.
- c. Any faith-formation classes should take place outside school hours and be strictly an opt-in facility. Educate Together encourages such faith formation to take place in the parish, mosque or in other religious locations.

This approach, 'Faith Formation Outside School Hours' (FFOSH), avoids the separation of young children according to religion. Educate Together has repeatedly advised on State education policy on the basis of its long experience in opening successful, equality-based schools. Disappointingly, the Government-backed CNS model of education requires 'Faith Formation In School Hours' (FFISH).

This model of education is encapsulated in the CNS *Goodness Me, Goodness You* curriculum, information on which is available online at the *Goodness Me Goodness You* website.¹⁵ *Goodness Me, Goodness You* is closely aligned with the *Alive-O* programme - the Religious Education devised by the Catholic Church and used in Catholic schools.¹⁶ Claire Moloney, author of *Goodness Me, Goodness You*, stated in 2009 that the '*provision of separate teaching was something that had been envisaged all along as an integral part of the programme*'.¹⁷

School Principals in the first CNS pilot schools are recorded as saying that splitting classes along religious lines was against the school ethos of inclusion. School teachers appealed for the continuance of integrated teaching but they were told that splitting classes was now '*a requirement*'. Teachers said this would be seen by parents as '*unfair and divisive*' and would

¹⁵ <http://www.gmggy.ie/>.

¹⁶ <http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/foirecord124.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/foirecord125.pdf>

spell ‘the beginning of the end for integrated religious education’.¹⁸ School teachers also raised concerns about overtly Christian texts that they felt needed to be revised and adapted to be more inclusive of others, with the shared programme perceived as too similar to the Catholic *Alive-O* syllabus.¹⁹

Conversely, Educate Together’s *Learn Together* Ethical Education curriculum helps learners to develop critical awareness and understanding of moral decision-making, and a heightened awareness of social, ethical and moral issues and standards. It is updated periodically. It nurtures respect of a person’s right to hold and practise religious and other philosophical life stances and focuses on questions of equality, justice, sustainability and active citizenship. It helps learners to think critically, empowering them to make a difference. It is due to the all-encompassing nature of the *Learn Together* curriculum and the evolving ethos of Educate Together that the organisation has moved away from its previous description of ‘multi-denominational’ towards the more human-rights-based ethos of ‘equality-based’.

Educate Together’s *Learn Together* curriculum and model of ethical education is freely available to both independent and state bodies such as the ETBs to implement with the proviso that they maintain equivalent standards of equality of access and esteem.

Legal and human rights

In setting faith-formation or faith-nurturing as a policy keystone of the CNS school pilot, the Government of the day asserted that the schools must provide for “all faiths and none”, requiring the registration, labelling and separation of children according to the religious identity of their parents. This raises serious legal difficulties for a State body, which must fully comply with our current equality legislation and constitutional obligations in relation to religious discrimination. If such practices are allowed, these schools will be the only part of our State services in which separate treatment according to religion is permitted. It would appear that these policies would be open to challenge domestically and also may be in violation of a series of human rights treaties to which Ireland is a signatory.²⁰

It would be unfortunate if, yet again, Ireland was criticised by the UN on the basis of human rights violations in schools. It is essential not only for families currently living in Ireland: if Ireland is to attract international business and investment, it must supply workers from overseas with a viable school option for their children. Many prospective workers considering a move to Ireland contact Educate Together to enrol their children. Educate Together schools do not require proof of religion and are fully in line with international equality legislation that protect the rights of children and employees. This is a model that could be smoothly and efficiently rolled out to current and future Community National Schools.

¹⁸ <http://www.rte.ie/news/special-reports/2012/0328/315388-educationfoi/>

¹⁹ <http://www.rte.ie/news/special-reports/2012/0328/315388-educationfoi/>

²⁰ <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
<http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

Socialisation of children

Apart from the legal difficulties, there are major issues for the socialisation of children in a primary school if they are separated. From an educational point of view, it is not desirable to imprint religious difference on very young children in a classroom. Children entering primary school are taking their first steps in a formal social setting and may be interacting with children of different ethnicities, social status and religious background for the first time. The messages given at such an important threshold in life are extremely important.

Instead of emphasising difference, the approach should be to imprint confidence in being part of a new social group on an **equal** footing. Young children are particularly vulnerable and sensitive to issues of identity, difference, unfairness and exclusion.

Just as treatment of minorities is a measure of the standards of equality in society, the treatment of children from families not identified as 'members of the main groups' is a measure of educational inclusion in a school. The actions of a school speak convincingly to children. Despite the very best efforts of the teachers to reassure children with words of equality and respect, the message of inequality may be quickly learnt. Children will see that they are treated differently according to their family's beliefs - and that one way of believing takes precedence over others.

There are significant social dangers in emphasising and consolidating religious difference in schools. If children see themselves treated differently on religious grounds in the classroom, they will quickly learn the lesson that they are 'other' as far as society and the State is concerned. As an emerging diverse society that has the opportunity to avoid some of the worst mistakes of others, we should not be courting these dangers.

Educate Together has been contacted by many parents concerned that their children cannot gain access to their local religious-run school due to the belief systems of their families. We have also witnessed families of children who 'opt-out' of faith formation in school with no adequate measures installed to reassure those children that they are not 'other' or 'different'. Taking faith formation out of school hours avoids these pitfalls and allows the child's family to nurture them in their faith and/or belief system without impinging on the rights of others.

The role of the class teacher

According to the limited publicly available information, children in Community National Schools are divided into four groups: Catholics in one group, Other Christians in another, Muslims in a third, and Hindus, Buddhists and Humanists in a fourth.²¹

Currently, primary school teachers in Ireland are educated to teach the religious programmes of the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland, yet there are limited training opportunities for teachers to learn about teaching the Ethical Education programme provided in the State's 81 Educate Together schools or for other minority religions. Educate Together believes that the significance of such a powerful influence as the class teacher taking one of the separated

²¹ <http://www.rte.ie/news/special-reports/2012/0328/315388-educationfoi/>

groups needs to be very carefully considered in that it may be seen to implicitly endorse one religious identity. It also places the class teacher in the position in which her or his religious identity must become stated inside of school hours, which may contravene employment equality legislation that is circumvented in the case of a denominational school but not a 'state school'.²² If faith formation within school hours is allowed, these schools will be the only part of our State services in which separate treatment according to religion is permitted.

If the classroom teacher has by definition to treat all children in their class equally, they must not be involved in separate religious provision. In CNS schools, the *'existing staff could all teach Catholicism [...] or the local religious leaders would be asked to nominate persons who could provide the teaching for each of the other faiths'*.²³ The only alternative to a situation in which the majority (Catholic) children maintaining continuity of education with their class teacher would be that the State provide fully qualified teachers to deliver each programme, as suggested by Bishop Leo O'Reilly, Chair of the Education Commission of the Irish Bishops' Conference.²⁴ In this case, the State would be required to shoulder the additional costs involved. The financial consequences could be significant.

Educate Together believes that **separate can never be equal** - the *Learn Together* Ethical Education curriculum used in Educate Together schools does not differentiate between any children and they remain with their classmates at all times for ethical education. Teachers are recruited on the basis of their qualifications and experience in teaching the National Curriculum rather than their faith background or belief. This avoids the bureaucratic difficulties of recruiting and vetting individuals from each faith group and organising space and timetabling for the required faith formation classes.

The operational and legal difficulties are profound

In dividing children for religion class a transparent means of identifying religious identity has to be established which raises issues such as:

- deciding on what basis the school can determine that a child is a member of such a group
- seeking consensus on what kind of document offers assurance that the declaration of religion is genuine and qualifies the child for the extra expense of faith formation classes.
- the possibility that if there are insufficient numbers to justify the expense of supplementary classes, there may be challenges to the declarations of others. This issue particularly could leave a school open to challenge from the parent of any child negatively affected by the system. Educate Together believes that such a challenge would be likely to succeed if the parent could provide evidence that their child was afforded less favourable treatment by the

²² <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/21/section/37/enacted/en/html>

²³ <http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/0329/foirecord125.pdf>

²⁴ <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/2007/12/13/bishops-announcement-state-model-community-national-school-phoenix-park-phibblestown-dublin/>

school on account of their beliefs or was pressurised or harassed as a result of such a policy.

Conclusion

The configuration of a new State system with the obligation to provide faith-formation classes within the school fails to address a series of fundamental educational, human rights and social issues that are central to the roll out of an equality-based system of State primary education in Ireland. It would be regrettable if this potentially positive step of State turning towards reforming Ireland's educational infrastructure becomes the subject of educational and legal challenge. Educate Together believes that this trajectory could be diverted into developing a State education system that serves all citizens equally and observes the right of children to be nurtured and protected in school. Educate Together is eager to assist the State and/or the ETBs to achieve this aim.

Transparency

Established as the State's alternative model to religious-run national schools, two Community National Schools opened as part of a five-year pilot evaluation programme. However, there are now 11 Community National Schools in Ireland. Educate Together is concerned that what at the outset appeared to be a limited pilot scheme has produced no easily-accessed assessment and continues to be rolled out without relevant empirical and/or evaluative appraisal. The General Secretary of the ETBI (the national representative association for Ireland's ETBs) recently recognised the inadequacy of this arrangement when he stated that the pilot phase has to 'end somewhere'.²⁵ Educate Together trusts that when the pilot period ends, the ETB will publish an independent and impartial assessment.

At the time of writing (December 2015), however, there is still very little publicly available information on this model of education. As a result, it is difficult to ascertain how the CNS model works in practice but it is to be assumed that the most problematic issues arising from policies such as FFISH are being circumvented by the many committed staff that are working within the CNS. Nevertheless, Educate Together is concerned that the Department of Education is proceeding to roll-out this model of primary school without due regard to a series of legal issues that have yet to be resolved and before any independent evaluation of the model has been undertaken or published. In light of this, the fact that the ETBs are planning to establish 22 schools along CNS lines by 2020 is a cause for concern.²⁶

²⁵ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/minister-urged-to-back-growth-of-community-national-schools-1.2363645>

²⁶ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/minister-urged-to-back-growth-of-community-national-schools-1.2363645>

Democracy

The Education Act (1998) states that all national schools in Ireland must have Boards of Management, unless there are short-term specific reasons for not having one.²⁷ However, due to their pilot status, Community National Schools have as yet no Boards of Management. At their inception in 2007 they were to operate under the interim patronage of the Minister of Education.²⁸ However, in 2015, the Minister continues as patron and the schools continue to operate with ETB-appointed school managers rather than Boards of Management. In the absence of Boards of Management, it could be claimed that these schools are operating outside of the legal framework established for all national schools in Ireland. With no formal parental, community or staff participation, the schools have been managed without the input of key stakeholders and with limited accountability.

In 2015, there is universal acceptance for accountability in governance and public service – as a charity, Educate Together is accountable and accessible. Educate Together believes that key stakeholders in education – parents, teachers and pupils must have an input into the running of a school. This maximises the potential for building a genuine partnership between the professional, objective role of the teacher and the necessarily personal involvement of the parent in their child's education.

²⁷ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/51/enacted/en/pdf>

²⁸ <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2007-Press-Releases/PR07-12-13.html>

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is Educate Together's assessment that the CNS model of education has been developed and implemented in such a way as to cause concern on a number of levels. In Educate Together's 38-year experience, it has become apparent that there is no real need for faith formation in school hours within the school day - it is socially and culturally divisive, operationally problematic and ethically questionable. It is not too late to prevent further injustice in Irish classrooms. There is no reason why Educate Together cannot lend its understanding and vision to help generate a State system of education that 'cherishes all the children of the nation equally'.

It is not necessary that equality-based schools in Ireland are run by Educate Together. Educate Together has practised a true model of ethical education for over thirty years and has offered its expertise and learnings to the State and that offer remains open today.

Should the State wish to provide equality-based education for all children, Educate Together is happy to be made obsolescent. Educate Together's model of ethical education is freely available to both independent and state bodies such as the ETBs to implement with the proviso that they maintain equivalent standards of equality of access and esteem.

In recent years, Educate Together has developed effective partnerships at second-level with a number of ETBs. In these schools, the Educate Together equality-based model is being successfully implemented, reflecting the aims of the ETBs and vision of the Educate Together.

We believe this can be further extended with the development of Educate Together primary schools in partnership with ETBs and the organisation is keen to explore how this may be achieved. The *Learn Together* Ethical Education curriculum used in Educate Together schools has already achieved what the current CNS model of education aims to do - **to provide equal access and equal respect to children living in Ireland**. It is Educate Together's hope that at national school level, an Educate Together/ETB partnership would use the *Learn Together* Ethical Education curriculum and that faith formation would take place outside school hours. These partnership schools would deliver the same level of equality of esteem and ethical education as pertains in Educate Together schools. Educate Together is ready to collaborate with all stakeholders to make a network of equality-based schools a reality.

Appendix 1: Key differences between Educate Together Model and the current Community National School (CNS) Model

	Educate Together Model	Current CNS Model
Governance	Independent patron governed by legal articles of company	Statutory body as patron able to be directly controlled by Minister
Patron Curriculum	<i>Learn Together</i> Ethical Education Curriculum integrated into all school activities	“Goodness Me Goodness You” programme that requires division of children on religious grounds
Attitude towards religion in school	<p>Ethical education programme during school hours.</p> <p>Optional faith-formation classes run by parents and churches outside the school hours.</p> <p>Children never registered, labeled or separated according to religion.</p> <p>Teachers not required to take any faith-formation classes.</p>	<p>Religious education and separate faith formation classes during school hours.</p> <p>Children registered, labeled and separated according to religion.</p> <p>Class teachers take faith-formation classes.</p>
Atmosphere	<p>Informal, first names for staff.</p> <p>Participatory democracy involving students, staff and parents.</p>	<p>Formal, titles for all staff.</p> <p>Hierarchical top-down.</p>

Appendix 2: Equality-based Educate Together Schools

For more than thirty years, Educate Together has offered an education that is equality-based, welcoming to and respectful of children of all religious, social and cultural backgrounds and based on human rights. Educate Together schools are safe spaces where no child is made to feel 'other' or 'different' and which avoid the separation of young children according to religion. Educate Together schools are set up and developed by groups of parents who wish to send their children to a school that is intentionally and purposefully learner-centred, co-educational and democratically run. They promote the fullest participation by parents, students and teachers in decision-making processes.

In Educate Together schools, any faith formation takes place outside of school hours. This is *integral* to Educate Together's ethos and model, as it respects the human and intellectual rights of all children, staff and parents. CNS schools, as is explored in depth in this document, provide faith formation within school hours which requires the registration, labelling and separation of children according to the religious identity of their parents.

The Educate Together model is founded on a legal commitment to parents, staff and children to run a school based on equality and respect "irrespective of social, cultural or religious background". The approach aims to mirror our contemporary social space in which division and discrimination on religious grounds is unacceptable.

The founding concepts are those of human rights and equality. This provides a rich discourse between different world outlooks that is inherently educational and respectful. From the earliest stages in school, a firm foundation of kindness and friendly interaction can be built using these guiding ideas.

The Educate Together model is built around this discourse. It places the responsibility for any faith formation on the child's family and if they belong to one, their religious organisation. The responsibility of the school is to provide a learning environment that is safe and supportive of the identity of the child - whatever that is.