

Report of the Admissions Working Group – January 2022

The Admissions Working Group is comprised of various stakeholders from within the Educate Together network. It was formed in 2021 to prepare a report prior to a General Members Forum prior to the debate of a number of motions regarding admissions policies in Educate Together schools at the 2021 AGM.

At the AGM, several of the motions were referred back to the Board of Directors. The Board of Directors asked the Admissions Working Group to facilitate a process which would clarify issues and support discussion among members.

The following actions were undertaken by the Group:

- Meetings with the Department of Education to clarify expectations and requirements regarding admissions, notably planning area requirements and the Department's opinion on specific questions raised by motions and in discussions among members.
- A survey of primary and post-primary Educate Together schools to gather data regarding the admissions process and particularly levels of oversubscription.
- A General Members Forum on 2nd December 2021 to support discussion and to seek members' views.
- An invitation for members to make submissions to the Admissions Working Group.

From this process, some key points have emerged.

- Members are acutely aware that the experiences regarding admissions are often influenced by local factors. In general, there appears to be an appetite for some level of prioritisation within the existing Department-defined planning areas.
- The Department will allow schools to prioritise pupils within the planning area, but this must be done irrespective of school patronage. The emphasis remains on geographical proximity for prioritisation.
- Some members argued that the current system is so unequal that positive discrimination that gives preference to children attending Educate Together primary schools is warranted. Other members, however, argued that this prioritisation would be contrary to the Educate Together equality-based ethos and gives tacit support to a flawed and unequal system.

It is the view of the Admissions Working Group that once neither positive nor negative discrimination exists (through either affording benefit to, or disenfranchising individuals or schools based on criteria other than geographic), local variations in Admissions Policies can align with Educate Together's equality-based ethos.

Therefore, the Admissions Working Group makes the following recommendation to the Board of Directors.

1. Educate Together would agree to allow schools to apply for variations to their admission policies within the following parameters, noting that the planning area must be included in the priority categories. Schools may apply for:
 - a. a reduced catchment area within a planning area and/or
 - b. proximity to the school from the student's home as measured by a GPS system and/or
 - c. feeder primary schools within the planning area that are located in a reduced catchment area, noting that all primary schools in the reduced catchment area must be offered equality of access based solely on geographical proximity.
2. Schools who wish to apply for a variation in their Admissions Policy need to make a reasoned submission to the Patronage Sub-Committee of the Board of Directors.
3. Schools may also choose not to apply for a variation, maintaining the current practice of only giving priority to siblings and then giving priority to any applicant living in the planning area. (While this could become a policy without referring it to the members, it seems prudent to bring this recommendation to the membership in the form of a motion at the next AGM).

Furthermore, the Admissions Working Group acknowledges the inherent bias and difficulties regarding admissions policies. Therefore, it recommends the Board of Directors advocates on behalf of the members for systemic policy change, not limited to the following tangible changes in practice:

- As demand exceeds places in many localities at both primary and post-primary levels in Educate Together schools, it is essential that more school places be made available to support parent choice. This means maximising capacity in existing schools and opening more schools as required.
- The practice of feeder schools should be reviewed nationally to ensure that this is based solely on geographical considerations.
- A centralised, Department-led admissions process should be established that is fair and transparent.