

Submission to the National Conversation on Education

Educate Together – February 2026



Educate Together is the representative body for a growing equality-based education network, with 42,000 children and young people attending 97 primary and 21 second-level schools nationwide. Our mission is twofold: to ensure all children and young people in our schools are supported to achieve their personal, social and academic potential, and to expand access so more families can choose an Educate Together school place.

Educate Together welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the National Conversation on Education. As an independent charity grounded in equality, democracy and child-centredness, we support the Convention's broad engagement and emphasis on the voices of children and young people. We share the Convention Chair's commitment to looking beyond short-term pressures to design sustainable, long-term solutions.

Children and young people are growing up amid rising inequalities, social division and climate crisis. Education must be more equitable and responsive to diversity and change. Ireland requires a system rooted in equality and democratic participation, where everyone feels an equal sense of belonging and is supported to thrive, now and into the future.

Educate Together's equality-based schools

Our diverse network welcomes students from all backgrounds and supports every child to belong and achieve, regardless of socio-economic status, religion, ethnicity, family structure or educational needs. 20% of our schools participate in DEIS and 70% host specialist autism classes, reflecting a sustained commitment to inclusion.

Inclusion in Educate Together schools extends beyond access. Schools actively support each learner to feel connected and engaged. Our modern Ethical Education curriculum fosters intercultural understanding, democratic competence, critical thinking and confidence to challenge injustice. Our Ethos Quality Framework sets high standards for Equality, Ethical Education, Child-centredness, Democracy, Participation and Sustainability.

As schools that are legally charged with upholding an ethos which is equality-based, child-centred and democratic, our schools are perfectly placed to identify and lead on practices which support these values – our successful Nurture Schools project is one example, achieving significant gains for at-risk students and embedding trauma-responsive practices across our network.

However, our system is not equality-based, child-centred or democratic, and our schools and our organisation face many challenges in achieving our ambitious objectives. Many relate to lack of investment in infrastructure, staffing and core supports, and we would like to see all barriers to equality and inclusion explored by the convention.

Meeting the demand for equality-based school places nationwide

33 years ago, the last National Convention on Education recorded “unanimous agreement among participants that the rights of parents to multid denominational education should be respected and facilitated” (p. 31). The subsequent White Paper highlighted the need for “interchangeability in the use of school buildings” to support this aim. Since then, Educate Together has opened 114 more schools, yet demand has continued to grow and access remains constrained, with 90% of primary schools still under Catholic patronage.

The 2014 Forum on Patronage and Pluralism Report documented the exclusion experienced by children from minority religious and non-religious backgrounds in denominational schools, and UN bodies have raised concerns regarding children’s rights and freedom from discrimination. The 2022 Census shows fewer than 69% of the population now identify as Catholic, while national polling indicates that most adults prefer multi-denominational schools.

Despite this, no new equality-based / multi-denominational Educate Together or Community National Schools have been sanctioned in recent years, and four whole counties still do not have a single non-religious primary school. The Convention must consider how equality-based / multi-denominational school provision can expand — through new schools in areas of growth and through reconfiguration where demand is clear.

The 2025 Primary School Survey demonstrated strong public engagement and should inform future planning. Patronage transfers involve complex governance and organisational change, requiring clear processes, facilitation and appropriate support. The Convention provides an opportunity to build consensus and address barriers to achieving a more accessible pluralist system.

Addressing structural underinvestment in Ireland’s school system

The Convention should consider our system’s basic physical and organisational infrastructure, and the extent to which schools across Ireland operate with insufficient structural supports, particularly at primary level and in new or developing schools. Principals increasingly manage complex organisations with minimal administrative capacity. While Educate Together schools have prioritised inclusion and support for students with additional needs, many schools experience constraints in funding, staffing, space, specialist therapies and professional learning. The Convention should examine how leadership capacity and inclusive practice are supported across the system.

Every child deserves a safe, warm and well-equipped school in their local area. 30% of Educate Together schools remain in temporary accommodation, 16% for over a decade. Prolonged reliance on temporary facilities affects wellbeing, curricular breadth and community stability. The Convention should explore what type of environments we want for our children, and whether current planning and delivery processes are sufficiently responsive to demographic growth and emerging need.

At system level, Ireland’s education expenditure remains far below OECD averages. The relationship between funding levels, inclusion and educational equity is a central issue for long-term strategy. Voluntary schools and management bodies provide diversity, choice and significant value for money, but are starkly underfunded, leading to inequity for children.

The Convention provides an opportunity to consider whether current funding models are aligned with the ambition of delivering inclusive, high-quality education for all learners.

Conclusion

The National Conversation on Education offers a significant opportunity to define what is required to ensure positive learning experiences and outcomes for all children and young people in a rapidly-changing world. With clear vision and sustained commitment, this ambition can be realised through targeted investment and thoughtful reform, including the continued expansion and support of Educate Together's inclusive school network. The evidence from parents, students, communities and demographic trends demonstrates both the demand for change and the readiness of society to embrace it.

Educate Together stands ready to contribute its experience, expertise and ambition for truly inclusive education to this national effort. If the Convention delivers a long-term strategy grounded in inclusion, parental choice and proper resourcing, Ireland can build an education system that reflects contemporary society and enables every learner to thrive.