

Senate Committee

May 6th 2014

Statement of Paul Rowe, Chief Executive Officer, Educate Together



I thank the Senators for the opportunity to highlight the very real issues that continue to face families who do not have access to multi-denominational schools around the country.

Ever since the 1970s, Educate Together has been at the cutting edge of the tension between the rights of children and families on the one hand, and the predominance of religious control of the Irish education system on the other. During this time, there has been a profound generational change of attitudes within the Irish population. This change in values and beliefs is not reflected in school provision and increasing numbers of parents are now being compelled to send their children to faith-based schools against their conscience and lawful preference. Over many years now, successive governments have ignored this infringement of rights.

There is ample evidence of the negative effects of the current imbalance. The current protection that children can 'opt-out' of religious instruction in denominational schools has been shown to be inadequate and utterly unfair. Research has illustrated the issues that result from the practice. Schools and teachers, with the best of intentions, cannot overcome the difficulties posed by the obligation to instruct children in one faith, especially since the rules require that a religious ethos should permeate the school day. We need to listen closely to the voices of children from minority faith backgrounds. They feel excluded, left-out and confused in this context, as evidenced in research from the ESRI and the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism.



It is fundamental to our world that children do not choose their parents or their family background. It is therefore impermissible that they should be discriminated against on this ground in State-funded education. This is particularly important to a modern democracy that has recently passed a referendum on children's rights and has as one of its founding concepts that of "cherishing the children of the nation equally."

We also need to listen to parents. Many Educate Together schools receive ten times as many applications as they have places to offer. A large part of our work is advocating on behalf of such families. They want their children to attend a school where their belief background will be equally respected; where their children can flourish in an atmosphere of equality with those of other backgrounds; where they can avail of a comprehensive ethical education curriculum and where, if they need faith-formation, it can happily take place outside the compulsory school day.

Educate Together now comprises a network of 68 schools serving approximately 17,000 pupils. This network is growing at an average rate of just over four schools per year. This represents just 2% of the system. This is far from the size of network required to address the needs of our society.

In 2012 and 2013, 44 areas were surveyed by the Department of Education and Skills to assess the need for change of school patronage. In 28 of these areas sufficient demand was identified for the Department to judge that change was not only necessary but also viable. In 25 of the areas surveyed, the result favoured a transfer from Catholic patronage to Educate Together.

As an example, Killarney is one of the 25 areas identified for transfer. The report on the parental surveys shows that there are 12 primary schools under



Catholic patronage in Killarney, with no alternative provision whatsoever for those who do not wish to send their children to a Catholic school. Nearly half of parents who responded to the survey said they would like to see provision reconfigured, but so far no way forward has been identified. In towns like Athlone, Cavan and Dundalk, parents have been campaigning for an Educate Together school for years. These are all large, diverse towns with no Educate Together option available. These towns have not yet even been surveyed, so we have a long way to go.

We have to report that, although we acknowledge the objectives set in the current programme for government, and the efforts made by the current Minister for Education and Skills, Department officials and some church leaders, progress has been very slow - painfully slow for families living in areas where there continues to be no choice. These families cannot wait. Their parenting is like a train that has already left the station. They need resolution of this issue now before their children start school. Strong political leadership is now required to move this process forward and to ensure that the rights of parents who have clearly expressed their preference can be vindicated. We would call on everyone here to support parents, church leaders, the Department and schools to make lasting change happen in communities across the country.

The current programme needs adequate funding if it to succeed. Educate Together has been working to establish its national network of schools for 35 years. Despite rising levels of popular demand, the funding we receive from the State to open a new school remains inadequate. We have to raise 90% of the funding we need to establish a new school in a community from private sources. While we have made considerable progress through leveraging

voluntary and community initiative and through fundraising, a realistic funding framework now needs to be put in place to advance this vital work.

We would like to ask the Senators to press the government to fulfil the recommendations of the ICCPR and a number of other UN bodies such as CERD, CRC, UPR and the Council of Europe. These bodies have consistently advised the Irish state to increase the availability of schools operating along the same guarantees of equality as are embodied in the Educate Together model. There is an opportunity to make real progress now in the context of the current divestment process. On behalf of families across the country, we ask you to show leadership and to lend your support to this process.

I would be happy to elaborate on any of these points at your request.

Bibliography

- Coolahan, J., C. Hussey and F. Kilfeather (2012). The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Report of the Forum's Advisory Group, Department of Education and Skills.*
- Daly, E. (2009). "Religious freedom as a function of power relations: dubious claims on pluralism in the denominational schools debate." Irish Educational Studies 28(3): 235-251.*
- Economic and Social Research Institute (2009). Religious Education in a Multi-cultural Society: school and home in a comparative context.*
- Mawhinney, A. (2007). "Freedom of Religion in the Irish primary school system: a failure to protect human rights?" Legal Studies 27(3): 379-403.*