

**Launch of
Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector**

**Speech by
Mr Ruairi Quinn TD, Minister for Education and Skills**

Irish parents have a deep interest in their children's education, especially at primary level. This is not a new found interest. That hunger for education has been there for generations and still remains to this very day.

Our primary schools are the people's schools. They are deeply rooted in their communities. This is shown by the involvement of more than 22,000 people from local communities in Boards of Management. I pay tribute to them for their spirit of volunteerism.

But local communities are changing.

We have become a much more mature society, respecting people who hold very different beliefs and viewpoints.

We have now a much more diverse population than we had even two decades ago. Twelve per cent of our primary school pupils are of migrant origin, for example, and have integrated well into our schools.

In addition, many people's views about the place of religion in society and in their own lives have undergone profound change.

The patronage of our schools needs to reflect those changes.

LAUNCH OF FORUM

This is why I am pleased to launch the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector today.

The Forum is a key objective of the Programme for Government for the education sector and I wanted it to get underway as quickly as possible.

I welcome you all here today, representing as you do parents, the patrons, management, principals, teachers and others. All of you have one interest in common – the quality of education for all our pupils.

I see the objective for this forum as being a very simple one. As a society, the patronage of our primary schools should reflect the diversity within our population. New mechanisms are required to enable the patronage of our primary schools to change to reflect choices required by parents. It is my view that all stakeholders should become involved in multilateral discussions on this topic.

I am delighted that the members of the Independent Advisory Group, Professor John Coolahan, Dr Caroline Hussey and Ms Fionnuala Kilfeather, have accepted my invitation to oversee the Forum. They will receive and assess your views and those of the wider community.

The Group brings to this process a detailed knowledge of the issues involved. This was gleaned from their involvement over many years at different levels of the education system. They also possess the particular skills required to elicit and distil the information needed to move forward. I have absolutely every confidence that they will lead the process successfully.

After a careful consultation process, the Group will then prepare the policy advice I need to take the next steps. It's a challenging task, given the complexities of the issues involved, but I expect that they will be in a position to have that advice for me by the end of the year.

CONTEXT FOR FORUM

We should note the historic context for this forum. For nearly two centuries, 95% of education provision at primary level has been denominational, largely under the patronage of the Christian Churches.

We are indebted to the Churches, and, in more recent times, to the newer patron bodies such as Educate Together, An Foras Pátrúnachta, VECs, the Muslim community, etc. They have shown great leadership in creating and sustaining a national network of primary schools. Our primary schools have catered for generations of Irish children in urban and rural communities alike. They have helped our children to develop as citizens capable of making their way in the world.

The significant societal changes that have taken place in Ireland in recent years have led to increased demand for new forms of multi-denominational and non-denominational schooling.

They have also led to increased demand for Irish language schooling in many parts of the country. Gaelscoileanna are now a much more common feature of the educational landscape than they were twenty years ago.

NEED FOR CHANGE RECOGNISED

The need to adapt our patronage structures to meet this changing reality is recognised by most people involved in education and beyond.

Indeed, the emerging new face of modern Ireland was acknowledged in a 2007 document published by the Catholic Bishops' Conference on Education entitled "Catholic Primary Schools: a Policy for Provision in the Future".

Three years ago the Conference published a survey of the attitudes of parents of children attending Catholic primary schools in Ireland. It asked parents what type of school they would choose for their child, if they had a choice.

Of the Catholic parents surveyed exactly half said they would choose a school under the management of a religious denomination; 37% said they would choose a school under management which provides for a common religious framework, 8% said they would choose a school not under the management of a religious denomination and the remainder said they would choose some other type of school.

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin has noted that 90% of all Dublin primary schools are under his patronage while the percentage of the population who actively want a Catholic education could be as low as 50%.

In addition, the Position Paper published very recently by the Catholic Schools Partnership sets out the many issues to be considered from a Catholic Church perspective.

Many other representative organisations and individuals such as the National Parents Council (Primary), the INTO, IPPN, the Irish Humanist Association and Educate Together have also called for a re-organisation of school patronage to mirror the changes that are taking place in society.

There has also been significant work undertaken by the Irish Human Rights Commission under the direction of Dr Maurice Manning. I would like to commend the Commission for the consultative process it has undertaken in relation to human rights and education. I look forward to receiving the Report of the Commission that will be presented to Government next month. Its arrival will be timely in terms of the

deliberations of the Forum. Indeed, the establishment of the Forum is a way in which the State is complementing the consultative process underway by the Irish Human Rights Commission.

Various United Nations and European Union bodies have noted the lack of school choice available to parents, particularly in the area of non-denominational education. These UN and EU bodies are charged with the implementation of international human rights and related instruments to which Ireland is a party.

It is likely that the demands for different types of schools will also be addressed in the forthcoming report of the Commission on School Accommodation, chaired by Frank Murray. The Commission has been looking at the establishment of new primary schools.

It's obvious that the State cannot provide more schools than are necessary just to meet the various demands, given the high cost associated with building and maintaining new schools where infrastructure is already in place.

NEED TO RESPOND TO CHANGE

This Forum represents the formal structure within which to conduct the debate on how we can move towards a system that is responsive to the needs of Ireland in the 21st Century.

The main players in this process are you, the audience gathered here today, your colleagues, fellow parents and all those who have an interest in the primary education system in Ireland.

It is a common goal for all of us involved in education that we provide the very best quality learning environment possible for our children and young people. This should be done within a school system that respects the rights of all children and their parents.

There are real questions to be answered about the match between our type of school provision, the demand for greater diversity and the make-up of the communities which need to be served.

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

I believe that we should be ambitious about what we wish to achieve in this area. If we aim high there is a greater chance of success.

It is probable that, over time, around 50% of primary school children will be in primary schools under patronage arrangements other than those of the Churches. The percentage will inevitably vary from place to place, depending on parental wishes.

The key issue for me is that the Forum will identify the practicalities that have to be addressed. We need appropriate agreements - which have the backing of local communities - that can be put in place to bring about change. Parents are central to these arrangements. The place of parents is recognised in the Constitution which guarantees to respect their right and duty to provide for the education of their children.

The details of what can be done and in what timescale are the main issues that should be teased out in the Forum process. I am happy to await its outcome.

There is a clear obligation to ensure that the rights of parents and their children are respected both in existing and new patronage arrangements. One of the strengths of the Irish primary system has been that the local primary school has been very inclusive of all the students within its community.

It is important to ensure that schools of different patronage types remain inclusive and reflect the communities in which they are situated. In particular, the arrangements for the delivery of religious education must be such that the rights of all members of the school community are acknowledged and respected.

In schools under Catholic Church patronage, the rights of parents to withdraw their children from faith formation classes must be addressed in real and practical ways. I acknowledge that a number of schools already make such provision. There are also sensitivities around the delivery of the integrated primary curriculum in these circumstances that need to be addressed.

Equally, the wishes of parents to have their children educated through the medium of Irish or to have the special educational needs of their children met within a mainstream classroom must be addressed in any change of patronage or school reconfiguration.

AGENDA FOR CHANGE

There is clearly both a broad agenda for change and a broad openness to change. It is within this overall context of change that the work of the Forum is essential. The key issue that the Forum will address is how change can be implemented.

Most, but not all, recognise the need for change. Yet we do not have agreed processes in place to identify the detail of the change necessary. Nor do we have agreed processes to ensure that the change is implemented.

There are a number of key themes that need to be discussed at the Forum and ways forward in implementing solutions to these need to be found.

The first is establishing the demand for diversity, taking into account parental wishes. For example, it could well be that, in a given area, one school may change its patronage initially and that further changes could take place in future years. The key objective is to develop the processes which allow these changes to be implemented.

The second theme relates to the practicalities of managing the transfer or divesting of patronage.

The third theme relates to how diversity can be accommodated in areas where there is just one or two schools and there is not sufficient demand to justify a separate school.

Professor Coolahan will outline how the Forum will go about its important business. My Department will provide the assistance needed in terms of hosting the website, secretariat back-up, information etc.

I want to stress that the report from the Advisory Group will be completely independent.

We must remember that the work of the Forum takes place against the backdrop of the current economic climate. I don't need to remind this audience of the difficulties the government faces in maintaining front line staff in our schools and public services generally.

Any recommendations of the Advisory Group must be capable of being implemented on a cost-neutral basis or it will not be possible to progress them. There is no point in interest groups submitting expensive proposals of great merit that cannot be implemented because of the costs involved.

What we all want are strong schools that provide good quality education to current and future generations of pupils - schools that respects them as citizens.

We have to produce practical solutions that will work over time. At the end of the day, I want this Forum to produce a clear road map that every citizen can follow.