

Irish bishops want religious education staying under their control

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The Irish government is about to start the process of taking some schools out of the control of the Catholic Church and handing them over to other sponsors.

Education Minister Ruairi Quinn says that he wants schools to reflect the increasing diversity of Irish life and the Catholic bishops have, apparently, agreed with this. The initial phase of the project will look at the possible transfer of about 50 schools in 47 areas where there is a demand for more choice.

But the Government is facing a clash with bishops over the proposed scrapping of an old primary school rule, Rule 68, which states that religion should underpin every aspect of daily school life.

The conflict has arisen over the recommendation in the report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism — which was set up by Mr Quinn — to get rid of the rule as soon as possible.

Rule 68 does not confine the teaching of religion to a daily half-hour class, but allows for religious teaching to be brought into all situations. For example, a teacher in a Catholic school could invoke one of the Ten Commandments such as "thou shalt not steal" to deal with a behavioural issue.

The abolition of the rule is among the wider proposals in the report aimed at ensuring that all schools are inclusive, and do nothing to make any pupil feel different on grounds of religion.

It was clarified yesterday that the changes proposed by the forum would also allow denominational schools to prepare children for sacraments, such as First Communion or Confirmation during the school day. However, the report recommends that any such instruction should be confined to the two-and-a-half hours a week allowed for religion and not eat into time provided for other subjects.

Dr John Murray, from pro-religion think tank the Iona Institute, said that the two recommendations were "a swingeing attack on the rights of parents who still wish to send their children to meaningfully denominational schools".

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