

Educate Together describes religious monopoly over Irish schools as “shocking”

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Educate Together, the independent NGO that runs non-faith schools in Ireland, has warned of the "shocking" control of religious groups over Irish education.

The new Admissions to School Bill 2015, which clarifies the process of enrolling children in schools, has been [criticised by Educate Together](#) for failing to address "the issue of religious discrimination in access to schools."

While the group welcomed much of the Bill as a "step forward" and recognised the "practical difficulties" in designing fair enrolment policies, their CEO Paul Rowe said that the reforms failed to tackle the domination of religious schools in the Irish education system.

"The fact that an increasing number of Irish parents consider that it is necessary to get their children baptised in the Catholic faith in order to access publicly funded schools, rather than out of personal religious conviction, is a shocking alarm note for a modern democratic state.

"There are still large areas of the country where parents have no alternative but to send their children to denominational schools, and the proposed legislation does nothing to address this.

"Genuine choice of school type that is compatible with the constitutional and human rights of all families can only be achieved if equality-based schools such as those provided under the Educate Together model are available all over Ireland."

The Irish Department of Education and Skills said that they could not take away the right of religious schools to "protect their own ethos" because the Bill had to be drafted "in the context of the Constitution."

Like the National Secular Society in the UK, Educate Together argues that state-funded schools should not be allowed to discriminate on the basis of religion. It says it is "not aware of any situation in which such discrimination is necessary in order to maintain the ethos of a school" and adds that "children of all religious, cultural and social backgrounds should be able to access all state-funded education."

Pointing out that 97% of the Irish primary school system is controlled by denominational schools, Educate Together is calling on the Government of Ireland to "provide an alternative to the overwhelming monopoly of denominational schools."

Educate Together currently operates 74 primary schools in Ireland. An Educate Together primary school was also [opened in September 2014](#) in Bristol. Their schools "guarantee equality of access and esteem to children irrespective of their social, cultural or religious background".

NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans commented: "Offering school places to young people on the basis of their parents' religious beliefs or activities is an indefensible way of deciding who can or can't access local schools. But as long as faith schools are encouraged, there will be demands to privilege children from certain backgrounds in their admissions – leaving others disadvantaged"

whilst at the same time contributing to [social segregation](#).

"Meanwhile, parents unwilling or unable to play the system, and feign interest in religion in order to get their children into the local top performing faith school are increasingly finding their options restricted.

"The solution is for all publicly funded schools to be secular – welcoming to children of all religion and belief backgrounds, but not in the business of promoting a particular belief position. If the purpose of publicly funded schools is to provide children with a broad and balanced education, there's no good reason for allowing schools to operate a 'religious ethos', or allowing them to discriminate in order to preserve that 'ethos'."

Around [one-third](#) of all state-maintained schools in England and Wales have a religious character. Of a total of 2,722 state funded schools in Scotland, 377 are 'denominational' – the vast majority of these are Roman Catholic.

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