

Parents protest against religious discrimination in Irish schools

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Irish parents demonstrated over the weekend for reform to the country's school admissions – in an education landscape still dominated by the Catholic Church.

90% of Ireland's [state-funded primary schools](#) are controlled by the Catholic Church, which can prioritise children from Catholic families in their admission policies. 97% of primary schools are run by a religious denomination, leaving a tiny number of secular schools for an [increasingly irreligious](#) country.

As a result, like in the UK, many Irish parents have their children baptised and attend church services in order to secure school places for their children.

The demonstration in Dublin was organised by [Education Equality](#), who campaign for "equality in the provision of education for all children regardless of religion."

In its mission statement the group writes: "Many Irish national schools operate on a 'Religious First' basis in enrolling students, requiring the production of a baptismal certificate or equivalent as a condition for admission. As a result, non-baptised children as young as four are turned away from schools, especially in urban areas where schools are oversubscribed.

"Equality in education is a human rights issue. All children and parents have the right to freedom of religion, to non-discrimination and to education. The current education system does not respect these rights of all Irish citizens."

Eoin O'Brien, a father of two, [told the rally](#): "We baptised the children, and had to go to church for several months. This was, by a very long distance, the most hypocritical and mercenary thing I have ever done. We weren't alone in this – we would exchange shy glances with other parents who were clearly in the same position."

Demand for non-denominational schools is very high given the low supply of them, and Mr O'Brien said that his family had no chance of getting into an oversubscribed Educate Together school.

[Educate Together](#) runs equality based schools in Ireland open to all children "irrespective of their social, cultural or religious background". They have recently begun opening schools in the UK and the NGO was awarded '[Secularist of the Year 2016](#)' for their work.

Mr O'Brien added: "We visited the local Catholic school and the local Protestant school, and both made it absolutely clear to us that only 'category 1' children would be getting places – children baptised in the appropriate religion."

While the Catholic Church still retains incredible levels of control over the Irish education system and, [according to one poll](#), over 90% of Irish children are baptised, only one third of Irish parents pray with their children and only 36% of parents bring their children to mass "regularly".

Earlier this year the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child urged Ireland to [protect the rights of non-religious and non-Christian children](#) and families by "expeditiously" and "significantly" increasing the availability of non-denominational or multid denominational schools. Ireland was also urged to amend the existing legislative framework to eliminate discrimination in school admissions.

Educate Together will be speaking at our 'Secularism 2016: living better together' conference on 3rd September 2016. [Tickets can be purchased here.](#)

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