

Ireland's education minister sets out plans to remove 'baptism barrier' to Catholic schools

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Ireland's state-funded Catholic primary schools are to lose the ability discriminate on the basis of religion in their admissions policies.

Education Minister Richard Bruton has [set out proposals](#) that will stop the country's 2,800 Catholic schools from discriminating on the grounds of religion – but will still allow minority faith primary schools to select pupils on religious grounds.

The concession to minority faith schools follows intense lobbying from Fine Gael ministers and backbenchers who warned the Minister an outright ban on religious selection could have unintended consequences for Protestant schools. The move is intended to ensure that students of minority faith backgrounds can find a school place in a school of that ethos.

Catholic denominational primary schools make up approximately 90% of all primary schools in Ireland. Schools run by minority religious organisations account for 6% of primary schools – the vast majority of these being under the patronage of Church of Ireland and Presbyterian organisations.

Announcing the plans at the Oireachtas Committee hearing on the Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill, the Minister, said it was "unfair that preference can be given by publicly-funded denominational schools to children of their own religion who might live some distance away, ahead of children of a different religion or of no religion who live close to the school."

He also said it was "unfair that some parents, who might otherwise not do so, feel pressure to baptise their children in order to gain admission to their local school".

However, the Department of Education warned that there are "complex legal and constitutional issues which will have to be worked out" in order to implement the proposals.

It said the changes will mean that for the first time non-religious families, who now account for almost 10% of the population (a figure which is significantly higher among parenting ages – close to 20%), will now be able to access their local State-funded primary school "on the same basis as other citizens".

Educate Together, an educational charity which runs equality-based schools welcomed the fall of the baptism barrier, but warned that the lack of school choice for all families in Ireland remains the fundamental problem.

Educate Together CEO, Paul Rowe, said: "Of course every child should be able to attend their local school - but, crucially, their local school should treat all children with equal respect, both at the school gates and in the classroom, regardless of religious, social or cultural background."

The group has pointed out that many parents don't want access to religious schools and called on the Minister to sanction more inclusive multi-denominational schools to meet that growing demand.

In 2016 the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child called on the Irish Government to promote the establishment of non-denominational or multi-denominational schools and to "amend the existing legislative framework to eliminate discrimination in school admissions".

Meanwhile, in England, the Government is still considering plans to remove the Free Schools' 50% faith-based admissions cap, to enable new faith schools to select all pupils on religious grounds. The plans, unveiled by Theresa May last year, are intended to facilitate the opening of more Catholic faith schools. The Catholic Church has refused to open schools while limitations are placed on its ability to religiously discriminate in admissions.

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