

Catholic Church to lose control of some schools in Ireland – could this be the start of a seismic shift?

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Following a survey of parents by the Irish Department of Education, 23 primary schools across the country will be divested of their Catholic Church patronage. The move is part of the drive to encourage more choice and diversity in the types of primary schools in Ireland. At present 96% of primary schools are under the patronage of religious denominations – 90% of which are Catholic.

In 2011 the Minister for Education established an expert group to consult with people and to make recommendations on how primary schools can become more inclusive of different traditions, religions and beliefs.

In April 2012 the Minister Ruairí Quinn accepted and published the Report of the Advisory Group to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector.

In June last year he started the process to look at the possible transfer of some schools run by the Catholic Church to other school patron bodies in 44 areas around the country.

Of those, 23 signalled a demand for change and the Catholic management of each of the schools will be given 6 months to provide proposals on how they plan to divest them.

Mr Quinn said: "We cannot ignore this call for change."

He added that he was confident of a generous response from the existing patron – the local Catholic bishop in each of the areas – to "the clear demand for change".

In practical terms, it means that in any of these areas, where there may be several local Catholic schools, mergers will be necessary to free up a building for a school under different patronage.

Where change is favoured, the multi-denominational Educate Together is the top choice and has been nominated as the patron for 25 schools, including in the five areas previously identified.

Paul Rowe, of Educate Together, said the results clearly showed demand for diversity of school type exists across the country.

The Catholic Church controls about 2,840, or 9 per cent, of almost 3,200 primary schools in Ireland – of which, the ones earmarked for change represent only about 1 per cent. But it could signal an important change in church-state relations over school patronage.

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