

UN calls on Ireland to recognise needs of non-Christian children in the education system

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The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has criticised Ireland in its periodic review, urging the country to protect the rights of non-religious and non-Christian children and families.

Strong criticism was made of the overwhelming religious control of Ireland's schools, and the Committee said that Ireland must improve access to non-religious schools. 97% of Irish primary schools are denominational schools.

It said Ireland must "Expedientiously undertake concrete measures to significantly increase the availability of non-denominational or multidenominational schools and to amend the existing legislative framework to eliminate discrimination in school admissions, including the Equal Status Act".

The report concluded that "Schools continuing to practise discriminatory admissions policies on the basis of the child's religion" and the Committee said it remained "concerned at the very small number of non-denominational schools."

The Committee also recommended that Ireland "ensure accessible options for children to opt-out of religious classes and access appropriate alternatives to such classes, in accordance with the needs of children of minority faith or non-faith backgrounds."

In its report, the Committee expressed its concern that "children are not [currently] ensured the right to effectively opt-out of religious classes and access appropriate alternatives to such classes."

Atheist Ireland, which campaigns for an "ethical, secular state", said their calls for a secular education system had been vindicated by the report.

The secularist group said that their representatives were "in Geneva in January when the UN Committee was questioning Ireland, and we highlighted the State's attempt to mislead the Committee about the Minister for Education's intentions to change the Equal Status Act."

Claims that the Irish government were to amend the Equal Status Act were false, Atheist Ireland warned. "Actually, the Minister and the Government have made clear that they will not be amending the Equal Status Act to remove the right of publicly funded religious schools to discriminate against children in access. The Government says they cannot do this without a referendum, as they say they have a constitutional obligation to buttress religious discrimination."

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