

Public Submissions

Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector

Themes for Written Submissions

The Minister for Education and Skills has appointed an Advisory Group to oversee the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector. The Advisory Group is seeking written submissions from interested parties to assist with its work as set out in the Terms of Reference of the Forum (outlined below).

1. Context for the Forum

Arising from the historical development of Irish primary education 96% of education provision at primary level is denominational, largely under the patronage of the Catholic Church (89.6%). Significant demographic and societal changes have taken place in Ireland in recent years which mean there is increased demand for new forms of multi-denominational and non-denominational schooling as well as increased demand for Irish language schooling.

In areas of growing population where new schools are being provided, it is easier to cater for choice in recognising new schools of different patronage. In areas of static population growth, catering for choice is less straightforward since there are a large number of existing primary schools in these areas. Providing for additional schools in areas with sufficient school places would have significant capital and operational costs. Providing for choice has to happen through maximising the use of the existing primary school infrastructure.

The Catholic Church has indicated a willingness to undertake such transfer/divesting of patronage in some of its schools and this represents one potential solution. Discussions between the Department of Education and Skills and representatives from the Catholic Church on this topic are already underway.

The role of religion in Irish education has been the subject of considerable debate in recent times. There is a clear challenge to ensure that the rights of parents and their children are respected both in existing and new patronage arrangements. One of the strengths of the Irish primary system has been that the local primary school is very inclusive of all the students of its community. In developing diversity in the primary sector, it is important to ensure that schools of different patronage types remain inclusive and reflect their communities.

The report of the Commission on School Accommodation on the “Revised Criteria and Procedures for the Establishment of New Primary Schools” is about to be published. Its recommendations will be pertinent to this debate.

2. Forum Terms of Reference

The terms of reference of the Forum are to advise the Minister on:

1. how it can best be ensured that the education system can provide a sufficiently diverse number and range of primary schools catering for all religions and none;
2. the practicalities of how transfer/divesting of patronage should operate for individual primary schools in communities where it is appropriate and necessary;
3. how such transfer/divesting can be advanced to ensure that demands for diversity of patronage (including from an Irish language perspective) can be identified and met on a widespread basis nationally.

In undertaking this work the Forum will, in particular, have regard for the following:

- the expressed willingness of the Catholic Church to consider divesting patronage of primary schools
- the current financial constraints within which the State is operating, the need for continued restraint into the future and the requirement in this context to make maximum use of existing school infrastructure in catering for future demands

3. Themes for Consideration in the Submissions

Interested parties are invited to make written submissions to the Advisory Group. The written submissions should deal with the themes identified in the final pages of this document. They may also wish to highlight additional topics, within the terms of reference, which they consider of importance to this debate.

Submissions should be sent to patronageforum@education.gov.ie or to Breda Naughton, Secretary to the Forum, Department of Education and Skills, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1 by Tuesday, 7 June 2011. Submissions should be accompanied by the Submission Form overleaf.

The Advisory Group will analyse and evaluate the submissions received. The Advisory Group will convene a conference in late autumn to present its provisional findings. Following this conference, the Group will prepare a report to the Minister with its policy advice for his consideration.

Consultation for the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector

Respondent's Details

Name	
Position (if applicable)	
Organisation (if applicable)	
Address	
Telephone	
Email address	
Date	

Is this response a personal view or is it made on behalf of an organisation?

Personal [] On behalf of an organisation []

Written submissions may be in English or Irish.

It is intended to place the submissions on the internet.

Information in relation to this submission may be made available to any person who makes a request under the Freedom of Information Acts 1997 and 2003.

Written submissions to the Advisory Group should address the themes outlined below. Submissions should be no more than 5,000 words in length.

Education should be delivered so that it

“respects the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society and is conducted in a spirit of partnership”

(From the Education Act, 1998)

The starting point for the dialogue on Patronage and Pluralism is:

we agree that diversity of provision in primary education is needed – **but**, the question is, how can this be achieved?

Three key themes are set out below to facilitate and to focus dialogue and written submissions should **specifically** address these. There is also provision for additional points to be raised.

1. Establishing parental and community demand for diversity

What should be considered in establishing the demand for diversity, taking account of parental wishes, in areas where the existing scale of school provision/ infrastructure is adequate?

Where the existing scale of school provision is adequate, how can school(s) be identified to be transferred/divested/amalgamated so as to allow for diversity?

How might competing demands for diversity be considered and accommodated?

In addressing “demand for diversity”, how can it be ensured that schools are socially and culturally inclusive?

2. Managing the transfer/divesting of patronage

Where changes of patronage are to be advanced, what practicalities need to be considered?

Please comment on some or all of the following:

What, if any, are the implications for:

- Existing (and future) pupils of schools
- Parental choice
- Enrolment including local co-operation between schools in a community
- Employment of teachers
- Teacher education
- Maintaining a student population that is inclusive and reflective of the school’s community
- School transport
- Ownership considerations and transfer of properties

How can these changes be implemented in a cost neutral manner?

Are there other ways to address diversity using existing school accommodation?

3. Diversity within a school or small number of schools

If there are **only one or two** schools in an area, how can diversity be accommodated where there is not sufficient demand to justify a separate school?

How can parental choice be respected in a multi-cultural, multi-faith society taking account also of the two official languages?

What are the particular implications for

- enrolment policies
- religious education and religious practice in a school
- religion as part of an integrated curriculum
 - in the short to medium term
 - in the longer term

4. Are there further topics, within the terms of reference, which should be highlighted? If yes, please elaborate?

In addition to the written submissions, exemplars of best practice to accommodate inclusivity are welcome.

Submissions must be returned by Tuesday, 7 June 2011. Please return your submission either to:

patronageforum@education.gov.ie

or

Breda Naughton
Secretary to the Forum
Department of Education and Skills
Marlborough Street
Dublin 1

If you have queries in relation to the submissions, please contact Breda Naughton at 01-8892496.