

Table of Contents

- ***Religion in schools: Opt out demand is 'very low'***
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Religion in schools: Opt out demand is 'very low'

Irish Examiner (13.03.2015) - <http://wwrn.org/articles/44155/> - Catholic education leaders are asking primary schools to facilitate parents who want their children to opt out of religious education, but claim demand for such options is not great.

A booklet on being more inclusive is being sent to all Catholic primary schools, which make up 89% of all 3,300 in the country, and includes guidelines on allowing pupils to opt out. The issue is particularly pertinent for parents of children at around 1,600 standalone Catholic schools for whom there is no other primary education option within reasonable distance.

The Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP) suggestions are based on best practice in schools catering for a wide diversity of pupils, and include children staying in class during religious education but doing other work. It is also proposed that schools could split the timetabling of religious education between class streams; organise supervised project work in another room if staff member is available; or allow a parent to absent a child from school to receive religious education elsewhere.

The booklet published yesterday says schools can only facilitate opt-out arrangements as resources are made available, as they have to comply with their own policies on curriculum, supervision, and child protection.

"The provision of such resources is the responsibility of the minister," it read.

CSP chairman Fr Michael Drumm said he hopes Catholic schools can facilitate good opt-out systems where needed but the demand should not be overstated.

"If you ask principals, the number of parents who actually ask for opt-out from religious education is extraordinarily low," he said.

The document tells schools to take care in second and sixth classes, when preparing children for Holy Communion and Confirmation, not to exceed the two and a half hours a week recommended in the curriculum for religious education.

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) said it is disappointed there are no references to many of the concerns raised at the 2011 Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in Primary Schools.

While the CSP document says parishes and parents can contribute to sacramental preparation, the union said it does not recognise teachers' concerns that they feel increasingly responsible for faith formation that is not actively supported by families or faith communities. The union said the booklet is silent on school rules allowing religion to permeate the whole school day. "This does not uphold the right of the parent to insist that their child not attend religious instruction of which they disapprove," said an INTO spokesperson. "Schools would value advice from patrons on, for example, the provision of a short period of reflection at the start or end of the school day in place of a prayer."

Education Minister Jan O'Sullivan will soon publish laws governing school admissions that would let her set regulations on the topic. However, faith-based schools which cannot accommodate all children seeking places will remain exempt from equality law, to allow them to give preference to children of their own faith.
