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'Like most of my friends, I baptised my children so they could go to school': The anger of Ireland's non-religious parents

Documents released to TheJournal.ie under freedom of information show the anger of Ireland's non-religious parents.

TheJournal.ie (16.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1TEs1pw> - IN SEPTEMBER OF last year, just over a week after the country's primary schools had returned from the summer break, a parent of a five-year-old sat down in exasperation to write a letter to the Department of Education.

Their child, they said, was being made to sit through religious education at the Catholic school they were enrolled in. "I am really annoyed about the whole situation," they began.

"My child has to sit everyday for half an hour looking at a book that he cannot read (he's only five) while the teacher teaches religion to the rest of the pupils."

"He's not allowed to do anything else, just look at the book. How would you feel if it was your child? And no, I cannot take him to a different school as there isn't [sic] any secular schools in [redacted], so he attends [redacted] senior infants."

Concluding the email, the parent asked the Department of Education one question: Could the child be withdrawn from school for the half and hour that religion was being taught?

In a follow-up letter she had these questions:

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I'd appreciate any information as well as why he has to stay in the classroom during prayers. The school has prayers in the mornings and also at the end of the day.

So for my child not to be discriminated and isolated in school, my questions are:

1. As I have Opted him out of Religion, can I take him out so he doesn't have to feel isolated and discriminated?

It's hard to tell a four year old "Not to listen to the teacher" for half an hour every day.

2. Can he start school after the morning prayer? I honestly don't want him to learn any religious songs.

And for the same reason. Could I collect him from school before they pray again before they leave?

3. Also, do schools have to have a fix time for Religion Classes? It would honestly be much easier for everyone if it was at the start or at the end of the day.

Many thanks.

This parent was not alone in their frustration.

Religious schools make up 96% of all of those operated in Ireland, and non-religious parents battle it out for a handful of places at those few non-faith schools.

Documents released to *TheJournal.ie* under the Freedom of Information Act show the anger of families frustrated by Ireland's religious-based education policies.

There is a clear pattern of exasperation in the records which cover the last six months of 2015. Exasperation of not being able to access non-denominational schools, while also struggling to find places at religious primary schools.

Why are there problems with Ireland's admission policy?

The [Equal Status Act 2000](#) allows for admission policy to "maintain the ethos of the school", something that in effect permits schools to give priority to children that share *its* particular ethos.

Appearing at a United Nations human rights review this week, new Tánaiste Frances Fitzgerald was quizzed by a number of countries, including the United States, about why this is still the case.

It isn't the first time that school's admissions policies have come under scrutiny by the organisation. In [February, a report released by the same organisation](#) needled Ireland's "discriminatory admissions policy" as an area of concern.

While the Department of Education's states that "enrolment policy must be non-discriminatory and must be applied fairly in respect of all applicants" - many parents find that the clause protecting ethos often undermines this.

'Parents like me are left with no school places'

Although schools are obliged to publish their admissions policies (the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill published last year makes the reasons a child is accepted or rejected from an oversubscribed school more transparent), they aren't obliged to change them.

Many parents contacted the department out of frustration at not being able to secure a place for their child.

"I wish for my child to be educated in the inclusive environment provided in an Educate Together national school," one parent wrote after term began last September.

"Unfortunately for [redacted] they did not get offered a space at the [redacted] Educate Together school. My children are not baptised and I do not wish for them to attend a Catholic school which provides faith formation in one religion only."

"Our situation is that due to existing Educate Together schools being oversubscribed, parents like myself are left either with no school places, or being left with no choice but to send our children to catholic schools against our wishes."

Educate Together has been operating in Ireland since the 1970s, and now has 77 national schools around the country.

The schools are under great demand for places (the parent went on to ask the minister to facilitate the establishment of an Educate Together school in the south Dublin area) - and currently the organisation estimates as many as 20,000 children's names are on campaign lists calling for new schools.

Reviewing the documents, a spokesperson for the organisation said they show "the sense of real injustice many families feel in their interaction with the Irish primary education system".

No other options

Non-denominational schools make up only 4% of schools nationally, and parents living outside of the major cities and towns often find they do not have the luxury of choice.

Back in August of last year, a 35-year-old soon-to-be father wrote to the department to say the following:

"Having been forced to move outside of Dublin to afford to live, I commute to Dublin and have set up home in a commuter town.

"There are a limited number of schools in the area and the closest one to our home and the one which I would foresee my child attending is a Catholic school, whose admission policy looks for a baptism cert for children.

"I find it disgraceful that State-funded schools can still discriminate in this way and I ask you to repeal section 7 of the Equal Status Act."

The letter is signed: "A tax paying, law abiding, atheist citizen of Ireland."

Another parent, describes their frustration at living in a rural area and having to have their child attend a religious school:

"As a new parent myself this issue is more immediate for my wife and I, as we live in a rural area and don't feel that the change will come soon enough for our child as the handovers of schools by the church seem to be quite slow. Soon enough we may be sending our first child to a school to be indoctrinated in a ethos/ philosophy that we don't have."

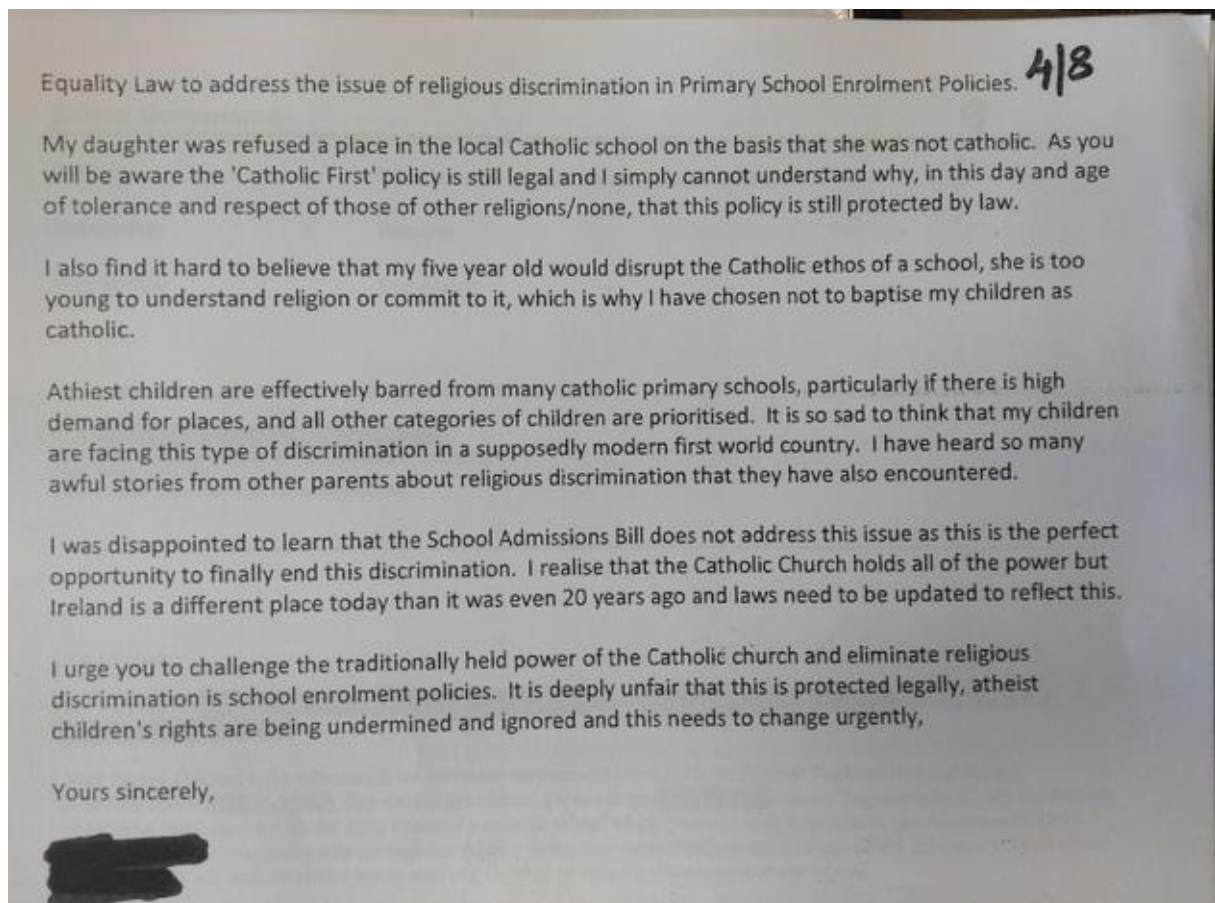
"This teacher may be an atheist but cannot admit that."

'Sham baptisms'

Baptising children to attend school is not overtly encouraged by the Catholic church. In December of last year Archbishop of Dublin Diarmuid Martin went so far as to call it an "abuse" of the sacrament.

Still – that doesn't stop it happening.

In one email sent to the department in June, a concerned parent slammed the practice of "sham baptisms" and said that her atheist children are "effectively barred from many Catholic primary schools".



Although this parent chose not to baptise their child, others did decide to take this option.

"I listen with interest to the conversations about the divestment of schools. I've heard regularly the argument that parents don't appear to want schools to be divested. In my experience this is not true," begins one email.

"Like most of my friends, I baptised my children so that they could go to the local school, which is just as well because the only non-denominational school in the area didn't have space for them. I am myself an atheist."

Divestment of schools was initiated by then minister for education Ruairi Quinn in 2011, with a report published by the Forum on Patronage and Privilege in 2012, outlining steps for how the education system could cater to children of all faiths and none.

But still, despite support from Archbishop Diarmuid Martin – this hasn't stopped other senior members of Catholic church and local schools from [resisting the change](#).

As the movement shows no sign of speeding up, it's not only parents of almost-school-age-going children that lose sleep over the issue.

In the email – written in August of last year – the parents of an 18-month son said:

"I never imagined I would ever write to a Minister's office but we feel we are being forced to christen our child against our wishes to ensure he will be able to attend school in our area."

"We feel it should be our right as parents to choose whether or not to christen our child, and that schools funded by taxpayers money should not discriminate against my child on his parent's lack of religious ethos."

Writing to former minister for education Jan O'Sullivan, one parent had this to say:

"We have friends and family, who despite having no religion themselves, have had their children openly baptised to 'jump the queue', **sometimes in more than one religion!** We do not plan on doing this."

Sitting through religious classes

Like in the case above of the five-year-old reading the book, children frequently find themselves having to sit through religious education classes once enrolled in a faith-based school.

And if they are able to leave class, there can be difficulty in providing alternative places for them.

As a spokesperson from Educate Together said: "Children from non-Catholic families who 'opt-out' of faith formation will continue to experience discrimination as they are removed from certain lessons."

Writing two weeks after the start of term last year, a grandparent wrote of the experience her daughter and granddaughter had when visiting a faith school they were impressed by:

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 17 September 2015 16:34
To: Minister for Education & Skills
Subject: Faith Schools

Dear Sirs

I wonder if you could let me know what the government stand is on Faith Schools.
My daughter went along, with her young daughter, to an open evening at a very good Faith school in our town.

They were very impressed on the standard of the academics and the whole atmosphere of the school – students attitude, friendliness and suitable attire in uniform.

When my daughter met the headmaster she asked the question:-

Would her daughter have to go to church, prayers and religious education – which at present in Junior school she is exempt. The headmaster reply was a definite yes.

As we are practising Jews this would be rather odd for an [REDACTED] who has been brought up observing all our Jewish Sabbaths and Holy days.

Is it not her Human Rights to be allowed to be educated without being expected to go to Church, Prayers – Christmas, Carol singing etc..?

Looking forward to your reply with interest.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

email: [REDACTED]

Written into law

In a statement to the United Nations Human Rights Committee last year, Ireland defended the school admissions policy as such:

“The legislation provides that, in exceptional cases, a school can refuse to admit a student who is not of the religion of the school; provided that it can prove that this refusal is essential to maintain the ethos of the school.”

This legal detail has been of great frustration to parents, with many pointing out the obvious contradiction in banning and allowing discrimination in the one breath.

Possible changes

If the stance around this is to change, the Irish constitution may well have to change – and that would mean a referendum.

Articles 42.4 and 44.2.4 outline that the State provides for religious education, and that it will not discriminate against a school on the grounds that it is religious. Article 44.2.5 states that each religious denomination has the right to “manage its own affairs, own, acquire and administer property, movable and immovable, and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes”.

It would be unfair to characterise the last government as indifferent to difficulties faced by Ireland’s non-religious parents.

In a response to *TheJournal.ie*, the Department of Education noted that under the last government a system was set up to allow parents to decide what type of school is set up

in their local area – something that resulted in 39 out of 42 schools established since 2011 being multi-denominational.

However, for many parents this still isn't good enough. As we head towards another enrolment cycle, the department and new minister Richard Bruton should expect another batch of emails.

