

**Humanist Association of Ireland Submission to the Forum on
Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector**

7 June 2011



Opening Statement

of the

Humanist Association of Ireland

Humanists take the view that religious instruction/faith formation is not an educational pursuit in the normal sense and is a private matter to be passed on in families and communities.

Consequently, we believe that it is not appropriate for a publicly-funded school system to facilitate, even indirectly, religious instruction during the school day.

We, as Humanists, believe that diversity can best be respected by an ethos of equality of treatment in a common secular education system. This will create a positive, tolerant and understanding school community that ensures all pupils receive equal treatment and consideration. Also, within the school community in this system, children are not segregated or distinguished according to religious or non-religious background, thus putting into practice the principle of equality.

It should be emphasised that such schools would likewise not have humanist instruction but rather be neutral, secular schools where all beliefs and non-belief are treated equally.

To manage this new structure, a new administrative framework could be established, comprised of Local Education Boards, which would mean that schools are not stand-alone entities, even though they could still maintain their own management boards. This structure could perhaps be implemented through an amendment of the current Vocational Education Act.

A primary school system based along secular principles would provide for education about religion along non-partisan lines. Secular, non-denominational schools do not in any way deny religious people their rights as parents are free to pass on religion within their own families and communities.

All groups – religious and others – who wish to avail of school buildings outside school hours for extra-curricular activities, should be entitled to access on a fair and equitable basis.

Religious instruction should not be the State's responsibility. If it is, the State will have to get into the business of determining which of the over 360 religions existing in Ireland today qualify as a religion for support and which do not. The State should not be the judge of what is a *bona fide* religion for the purpose of support. Religion is a private matter and its validity is not and should not be dependent on the endorsement of the State.

Therefore, every part of the country should have at least one non-denominational, secular school, accessible to parents within a 12 kilometre radius, which caters for the families who wish their children to attend a school where no priority is given to one religious belief over others.

It should be noted that diversity relates not only to religion but also traverses issues of language, holidays, rituals, and customs. The State's primary responsibility should be to facilitate imparting academic knowledge, skills and good citizenship to the students.

Submission Themes

Theme 1: Establishing parental and community demand for diversity

Sub-Theme 1: What should be considered in establishing the demand for diversity?

1. Parents should be canvassed as to the education they would prefer and the education they could accept for their children through the conducting of a poll in every school, as part of regional surveys. The questionnaire could be prefaced by an explanation as to the poll's intentions, *inter alia*, the Minister's observations in his introduction to the Forum of the difficulty of catering for every denomination and the importance of diversity. If the poll does enquire as to the parents' religion – despite it not being required given the questionnaire's objectives – it should be asked after the question as to their desired school system. Survey results should be considered on a regional basis to ensure true diversity of choice for those living in the area.
2. Parents' wishes with respect to religious diversity should be obtained by means of affirmative consent; that is, parents should convey their desired options in writing. This process should be administered by neutral agents with no vested interest in any of the options under consideration. Parents should not be approached by members of the clergy or other interested parties. Instead, parents should complete a form, questionnaire or other appropriate document for the local state authorities or relevant local educational department. Parents' intentions regarding their children's education should not be 'deduced' from documents such as baptismal certificates.
3. There needs to be effective monitoring of the range, neutrality, clarity and simplicity of the questions that parents will have to answer in any efforts that will be made to measure the required diversity of the educational system.
4. A discussion-based subject concentrating on citizenship, religious, ethics and so forth – as opposed to religious instruction in any particular creed – would cater for all those who do not wish any particular belief system to be permeating the school day or denominational instruction during school hours.
5. With respect to the issue of divesting/transferring patronage from religious denominations, principally the Roman Catholic (RC) church, it is essential that this takes place nationwide and not just in urban areas.
6. Every part of the country should have at least one non-denominational, secular school, accessible to parents within a 12 kilometre radius, which caters for the families who wish their children to attend a school where no priority is given to one religious belief over others. In urban areas a higher concentration of non-denominational schools may be required, given the greater relative demand for school places.
7. Finally, the issue of educational standards should not be omitted in this debate. By concentrating so heavily on religious instruction, pupils and trainee teachers receive reduced instruction in academic subjects. In addition to fostering an environment where diversity can flourish, attention should also be focused on improving educational standards.

Sub-Theme 2: 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?

8. As noted in Point 1, pinpointing survey/surveys could help determine the levels of diversity of pupils. The surveys should be comprehensive, encompassing all schools and the results analysed locally/regionally rather than per school to ensure its objectivity and solutions based on regional statistics. This process could be relatively cost neutral. Schools with the most significant quantity of pupils differing in religious or non-religious beliefs from the patron religion in a particular region could be prioritised for divesting. This survey should be comprehensive, encompassing all schools and the results analysed both per school, in order to help decide which schools might be prioritised for divesting, and regionally.
9. While the target of 50% has been established by the Minister – and we recognise the importance of establishing a clear objective to this process – focus should not be solely on the number of schools to be divested. Catering for diversity should be a core of Government policy irrespective of how many denominational schools will divest and, for example, there should be at least one non-denominational school within a 12 kilometre radius for every family. As noted above, the standard and quality of education as well as regional spread should be taken into consideration.
10. The divesting process must ensure that its actions lead to greater diversity in choice for parents. For instance, if two or more schools are being considered for amalgamation, the school providing the greater diversity (e.g. non-denominational, adhering to the Educate Together model etc) should have the lead role.
11. Where it proves impossible to accommodate all parental wishes in a given catchment area, priority should be given to secular education and then to the pluralist sector. Denominational schools should only be considered when the secular/pluralist sectors have been accommodated, given their commitment to genuine diversity.
12. It is important religious patrons are not allowed to simply decide which schools they wish to 'volunteer' for transfer. The divesting process should be clear and transparent. For example, in rural areas, religious patrons may wish to divest themselves of smaller/more remote schools already earmarked for closure or amalgamation with larger schools. The divesting process therefore needs to be closely monitored.

Sub-Theme 3: How might competing demands for diversity be considered and accommodated?

13. To optimise diversity, schools should be 'religion-blind' or, perhaps more accurately, 'belief-blind', as outlined in our submission's Opening Statement. Schools should accept and treat all pupils equally regardless of their cultural and belief background. They should not be separated for any subject during the school day that pertains to how a student defines themselves such as with respect to their race, religion, language spoken at home etc. These issues relate primarily to their parents/guardians and heritage and it is wrong to separate pupils on the basis of features of their parents. Children should be free to think about religion also.

Sub-Theme 4: In addressing "demand for diversity", how can it be ensured that schools are socially and culturally inclusive?

14. There should be no religious requirements or test of either the pupil or their parents/guardians with respect to any pupil's admission.
15. All schools should recognise religion as an important element of culture, in the same way that art, music, literature, food, clothes, sport, history, language, and non-religious rituals/events are recognised in this way. Schools should have a policy on this issue and teachers should be instructed on it, if this has not been done already. Religious education – as opposed to religious instruction – could come as one thread under a course unit such as 'Irish, European, and World Culture' or a general sociological/cultural course. Knowledge of religions of the world should be a major element of this course.
16. It is evidently preferable that local children attend schools in their locality and resources should be fairly and transparently allocated between them. Schools should be encouraged in inter-school activities – in order that children learn about children from other backgrounds.

Theme 2: Managing the transfer/divesting of patronage

Sub-Theme 1: Where changes of patronage are to be advanced, what practicalities need to be considered

17. A range of logistical issues need to be taken into account including, *inter alia*, the current condition and size of the relevant school building/s, potential for future expansion, location and accessibility of the school, geographical location (e.g. rural vs urban), potential disruption and arrangements that need to be made to accommodate students as a result of their school transferring/divesting patronage.
18. Patronage/management boards should be headed by professional administrator or educator, not clerics. Prospective candidates should be elected rather than appointed and should not be required to have religious qualifications.
19. Given the Forum's objectives to divest patronage of 50% of primary schools and that currently 90% of these schools are under RC patronage, it is clear this process will primarily impact on the RC church.
 - Legislative backing – e.g. enactment of legislation - to ensure schools are not run or managed by religious organisations but by academic educators and professional administrators would be a positive step. Primary schools should be non-denominational and school buildings should be under the control of the State or at least a non-denominational body rather than religious organisations.
 - There will be a need for high level 'change management' meetings between the Minister for Education and Skills/Department of Education and Skills (MoE/DoE) and RC bishops and teaching orders to supervise this transitional process.
 - The government has pointed out that the money & land/buildings (€128 million) promised by the RC church/orders to fund compensation for the victims of sexual and physical abuse on the parts of the religious orders is insufficient. In order to help ensure the divesting/transfer process is 'cost neutral', the DoE could present the transfer of school land/buildings as part of this extra transfer. The problem with this approach might be that those RC bodies that owe the extra land/money to the State might be different from those controlling school properties and land. However, it would be an avenue worth exploring in order to ensure costs are kept to a minimum.

20. Where it is not possible for the management body to be changed immediately, a transitional joint management body, composed of professional educators in addition to the current board, should be composed to oversee the process of divesting/transfer.
21. It is imperative that all stakeholders – boards, teachers, parents, pupils – are kept fully informed of any potential changes this process will entail to their school day, curriculum and so forth.

Sub-Theme 2: Comment on All of Some of the Following

Existing and Future Pupils of Schools

22. It is imperative that where children may have to swap schools that this process is carefully planned and coordinated in a timely and transparent manner between the relevant organisations and schools involved. If the survey, proposed in Theme 1 above, was implemented it would help make this process as transparent as possible and thus help facilitate the desires of parents and pupils as greatly as possible.
23. To minimise any potential disruption in the learning process of current pupils, a process of gradual change towards the new management structure/educational curriculum could be implemented in consultation with teaching bodies and parents. New pupils to the divested primary school should enter under the new system.
24. The divesting of schools cannot reasonably promise all pupils and their parents now in denominational (mostly RC) schools that they can remain in such a school. However, as Archbishop Diarmuid Martin has correctly highlighted, many RC parents do not want their children to go to an exclusively denominational school.

Parental Choice

25. Every parent in the country who wishes to send their children to a non-denominational school should be able to do so in their own locality/within reasonable distance of their home.
26. All schools should have an elected parents' council.
27. The conducting of a survey in every school would provide parents with the opportunity to have their opinions heard with respect to diversity. Parents should be required to provide affirmative consent of any choice they make with respect to their child's education.
28. Previously, educational policy was based on the concept that Irish citizens and residents could be allied with others of the same belief, and the head(s) of the religious organisation could have schools established in accordance with these beliefs, provided it was economically feasible. This approach favoured majority belief groups such as Roman Catholicism.

The Forum, in contrast, is (correctly) placing a higher priority on pupils NOT having to attend denominational schools to which they might not adhere or subscribe. All families would benefit by having their beliefs respected and their children attending schools where they could learn from other pupils from different backgrounds, with no religion being given preference. Parents will still be able to instruct their children in their own religion and avail of school premises for this purpose outside school hours.

29. Although the wishes of parents need to be respected and provided for as far as possible during this process, the community [i.e. the State] should retain a watching brief and ultimate sanction in the event of diversity not being respected.

Enrolment including local co-operation between schools in a community

30. Neutral enrolment policies should be enforced as an initial step and questions as to parents'/pupils' religion should not be permitted.
31. In every area there should be non-denominational education for children. State supported non-religious patronage schools should be given preference given their greater inclusivity and respect for diversity.
32. Local co-operation is eminently desirable, but detached oversight will be desirable to see that justice is not only done but is seen to be done.
33. The proposed survey of schools on a local/regional basis, would facilitate this process and planning for future needs and co-operation between schools in a community.

Employment of Teachers

34. Recruitment should be on the basis of a teacher's qualifications, experience, and aptitude for the position in question. The existing provision in the Education Act that modifies equality legislation so as to allow a school discriminate in employing teachers should be abolished.
35. The religious views or otherwise of a teacher should not be a consideration in assessing their suitability for employment. Teachers' unions have voted against any discrimination on religious grounds against teachers on the part of a religious institution and it is wrong that they be discriminated against on the grounds of their private beliefs.
36. The only obstacle to policy change relates to local conditions of service. The DoE should ensure that no teachers shall have their conditions of employment worsened as a result of the divesting/transfer of a school.
37. Religion/Religious instruction is not formally part of the national school curriculum. This is entirely up to the patron in terms of content, approach and integration into the rest of the curriculum. As it stands, teachers are not technically paid salary by the State for "teaching" religious instruction/faith formation (two and a half hours per week plus preparation for sacraments), although their pay does cover them integrating religion with other parts of the curriculum during the rest of the school day.

Teacher Education

38. Teacher training colleges should be non-denominational. The State should ensure there are non-denominational teacher training colleges available for trainee teachers. The DoE should commit to ensuring that at least one teacher training college is non-denominational by the end of 2012.
39. A teaching certificate from any certified teachers' college (not just those approved by a religious body) should be the standard for any candidate for a teaching position.
40. The MoE should apply the same policy, as enunciated by the Forum, to teacher training colleges. At least 50% of these establishments should be removed from denominational control immediately and run on the same basis as other tertiary educational colleges.
41. Teacher education should not include religious instruction as a subject. Religious education, which looks at different religions and belief systems, should be established as a subject in its place. It is unacceptable, on educational grounds,

to prioritise religious instruction for trainees over academic subjects such as science, modern languages and so on. In the Teaching Council study of Mary Immaculate College, it was found that trainees spent four times as much time being instructed in religion – not a statutory part of the curriculum – than in science, geography or history. Teacher training should emphasise improving the standard of trainee teachers in the statutory curriculum to improve pupil educational achievement.

Maintaining a Student Population that is Inclusive and Reflective of the School's Community

42. The Educate Together school model serves as an example worthy of emulation. In this model, parents can elect people to the board of management, thus facilitating the creation of a democratic and responsive organisation. Moreover, it helps create a genuine mixture of pupils, not just in religious terms, but also from different social classes and backgrounds, thus promoting social inclusion and understanding.

School Transport

43. In order to achieve equity of treatment, in terms of diversity, consideration should be given to providing financial assistance for transport in cases where non-religious families must attend a school a considerable distance from where they live. This is no different from the current situation where denominational schools receive state funding, which enables them provide religious instruction to pupils.

Ownership Considerations and Transfer of Property

44. As noted above in Point 19, property should be transferred free to the State in lieu of the millions still owed by the RC Church to the State in relation to abuse of children in residential institutions. The MoE could present the transfer of school land/buildings as part of this extra transfer. Attention would have to be paid to the fact that the particular RC organisations that owe the extra land may not be the same as the RC organisations that own the schools.
45. Legislation could be enacted to transfer school buildings from the denominational patron to the new patron. Diplomatic meetings should be arranged between the Department of Education, Roman Catholic bishops, other concerned denominational bodies and the teaching organisations to oversee this process.
46. Full account should also be made of the State's past contributions to the acquisition and maintenance of existing schools no matter which non-state body now holds control over that school's facilities. The transfer of property should be in the State's financial interest where compensation by the church bodies should be made in recognition of the decades of state support for religious functions and of the cost of 'faith formation' over the past, which was in the respective church patron's interest.

Sub-Theme 3: How can these Changes Be Implemented in a Cost-Neutral Manner?

47. Auditors could be engaged to quantify the financial subsidy that has flowed to denominational churches/schools in financial supports and teachers' salaries since the mid 19th century. This could inform how much property should be transferred to the State without making payment. This is not to infer that all the calculated sums would be recompensed to the State but it would place the MoE in a stronger bargaining position. This could be put together with the increased compensation being sought by the State in lieu of the abuses perpetrated by certain members of the religious community.

48. As the State assumes greater responsibility to assure diversity and community patronage, funds once directed to religious bodies would accrue to the State.
49. The new schools, after divesting/transfer of patronage, will continue using the same facilities. The amalgamation of schools of differing religious ethos – into a multi- or non-denominational school – would enable the combination of facilities/teachers and hence a potential decline in running costs.
50. Volunteerism by parents/teacher/pupils in school maintenance, sporting supervision and other activities should be actively encouraged.
51. The divesting/transfer of patronage should not prove expensive. There might be an issue of compensation to religious staff members who choose not to continue in the non-denominational school, though if they refuse the option to stay on this could be contested. Transport costs might become an issue as noted in Point 43 above. However, the increase in running costs should prove minimal.
52. Consideration should be given to not providing additional State funding for the establishment of further denominational schools, given the Forum's objective to increase diversity of patronage.

Sub-Theme 4: Are there other ways to address diversity using existing school accommodation?

53. Religious and other groups should be permitted to avail of school facilities outside school hours.

Theme 3: Diversity within a School or Small Number of Schools

Sub-Theme 1: 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?

54. Diversity can never be achieved by continuing with the previous policy of denominational schools which maintain a policy of separation and segregation based on religious difference. The Forum is therefore warmly welcomed.
55. Every effort should be made to ensure pupils with minority beliefs have their values respected. A secular or non-denominational approach, which by definition embraces diversity, is preferable to one where several different types of schools will be facilitated which segregates pupils based on parental/family beliefs.
56. Many parents are dissatisfied with the range of primary schools accessible to their children, whether in terms of religious instruction or other factors. This fact should be remembered when considering the Forum's 'catering for diversity' approach.
57. In rural areas, where there is only one school within a certain radius for parents, this school should be non-denominational. Diversity will be realised by the school not giving special recognition to any religion and religious education being a subject rather than in the form of instruction. Parents who want their children to be instructed in a particular religious belief could use the school premises, outside school hours, for this purpose. This would facilitate 'catering for diversity', as enunciated in our 'Opening Statement'.
58. Each child is unique, as is each family. There should be a common core of civic values – not based on religion – which encompasses citizenship, respect, environment and the discussion of ethics. The Educate Together model could serve as a template.

Sub-Theme 2: How can parental choice be respected in a multi-cultural, multi-faith society taking account also of the two official languages?

59. The State cannot completely accommodate all groups or individual diversity which exists within society. However, it can try to optimise the diversity of choice.
60. The provision of diversity with respect to religious and non-religious belief is different from providing access to education in the two official languages. Religious belief or an ethical life stance without religion are statements about who the person is and can become an issue of segregation and sectarianism. While there is obviously segregation with respect to education in different languages it is not a determinate in the identity of a person.
61. The policy being examined by the Forum means that having a school of one's denomination available cannot be guaranteed. The issue with language is different. To attend a school having Irish as a first language does not require any special and additional activities, such as preparing for communion and other religious ceremonies or parental commitment to the Irish language as if it were a belief system.
62. If there should only be one Gaelscoil in an area, with a radius of 12 kilometres, the school should be non-denominational to ensure greater diversity.
63. On another level, if less time was spent in schools on religion, religious ceremonies, e.g., preparing for Communion and Confirmation, and other religious activities, there would be more time to learn languages and, indeed, improve educational standards generally.

Sub-Theme 3: What are the particular implications for...

Enrolment Policies

64. The enrolment process should not concern itself with the religion of the pupil or parents or other issues such as the child/parents' country of origin.
65. Enrolment policies should be strictly egalitarian, based on proximity to the school. If there were 2 RC schools in a particular catchment area and one was made non-denominational, its intake would overlap with that of the school which has remained RC, thus increasing diversity. However, the RC school should be required to develop an egalitarian enrolment policy; for example, the school should not demand baptism certifications or other proof of religion as part of its enrolment policy.

Religious Education and Practice in a School

66. Firstly, we need to clearly differentiate between religious education (about religion) and religious instruction (faith formation).
67. The new non denominational schools would not give special recognition to any religion, but would discuss the special dates, tenets and special activities of different religions and secular beliefs. Religious education should not be limited to the sum of the beliefs of the present pupils and parents. It should be a specific subject or have the status of a subject. Pupils should not be told the positive (or negative!) features of the doctrines of their own religion or non-religious beliefs during the school day. For example, education about religions and non-religious belief systems could be done in an historical context and in a comparison between world religions. The school premises could be used for religious instruction outside school hours. Enrolment would only be by affirmative consent of the parent(s), specifically for this class.

Religion as Part of an Integrated Curriculum

Short to medium term

68. In our view, legislation should be enacted to disallow religion instruction being integrated into the rest of the curriculum. A proper religious education curriculum, which looks at different religious and belief systems, should be drawn up in its place.
69. In the new non-denominational schools the curriculum that would be integrated would involve the non-ideological presentation of and discussion of religions. It should not be limited to the sum of all religions or beliefs of the present pupils and parents. In the denominational schools, the approach to religion would probably remain as it is now.

In the longer term

70. Religion and free thought should be taught as a cultural phenomenon in a historical context.
71. The new non-denominational schools' religious curriculum should be as in 67. The still-denominational schools may in later years be seen as giving distorted views to the children there, contrary to the need for an integrated and peaceful society. So their curriculum probably will need to be obliged to change with these schools being required to provide an overview of religions in an objective manner, while still free to explain fully their own doctrines.
72. Religious instruction should be separated from the State's role in providing academic education for primary school pupils and should take place outside school hours whether on the school premises or elsewhere.