

## Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Leinster House

Dublin 2

### Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill, 2016

Committee meeting Leinster House 2000

14:30 December 15th 2016



*Statement by Paul Rowe, CEO, Educate Together.*

I'd like to thank the Chair and members of the Committee for this opportunity on behalf of the tens of thousands of parents and children who now attend Educate Together schools.

We welcome the Minister's efforts to bring greater transparency to the fraught area of school admissions.

This is an area of longstanding concern for Educate Together. We are striving for a system which provides equality of access and esteem to children. Since demand for our equality-based schools far outstrips demand, we are more familiar than we would like to be with issues of oversubscription. Equal access is one of our core objectives, and yet with growing pressure on them to meet ever-increasing demand, it is a challenge for our schools operate enrolment policies that are as fair as they can be.

First and foremost, then, there is a need to reconfigure the education system to bring it into line with parental demand. In this regard Educate Together applauds the recent Government commitments to bring the number of non-denominational and multi-denominational schools to 400 by 2030. Correcting the current imbalance in school types will reduce oversubscription, thereby reducing situations where families cannot gain access to their chosen school type.

We believe that there is a necessity for systemic reform of school admissions, with the State taking responsibility for an area-based system in which parents' preferences are collected and school places are allocated in a fair and transparent manner. We would like to see stronger powers for the Minister in Section 65, so that such a system could be enabled.

We are particularly concerned with the retention of measures to allow religious discrimination in Section 61.2.b. In our experience, this remains the most serious issue concerning school admissions facing a rising number of families in Ireland.

Until this is addressed both by legislation, and by dramatically increasing the availability of Educate Together model schools, the political issue of school admissions will not go away.

We are also concerned with section 62, 6 (h), relating to opt-out provision for children whose parents do not wish them to attend religious instruction. While we understand the Minister's wish to shed light on an area hitherto unclear, Educate Together contends that when children of minorities simply 'opt out' of faith formation classes within school hours, this leads to exclusion. Merely requiring schools to publish their arrangements does nothing to prevent this exclusion.

In relation to the provisions in Section 66, which enables the NCSE to designate the school which a child shall attend, it is important that the legislation is strengthened to place a responsibility on the NCSE to ensure that all necessary resources are in place *prior* to the admission of the child. Children with special educational needs have a right to *more* than just a school place - they have a right to an education which meets their needs.

I look forward to discussing these and can assure you that Educate Together's accumulated experience of managing schools is at your disposal.