

Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2020

the Irish Primary Principals' Network

Prepared for:

The Joint Committee on Education,
Further and Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science

Prepared By:

Irish Primary Principals' Network

28 January 2022

IPPN thanks the Joint Committee for the invitation to participate in a Pre Legislative Scrutiny meeting on the Education (Admissions to School) Bill 2020 on 1st February 2022 and apologises that we cannot attend. This is due to prior commitments, including overseas travel, and also due to the clarification received that the discussion will relate mostly to issues at post-primary level.

IPPN and the proposed amendment

IPPN fully supports equitable access to school for all children. IPPN believes that ensuring that priority is given to children living in the catchment area of a school is the fair and equitable approach to school admissions. We also believe that siblings must have equal status to children living within the catchment area.

Relevant matters for the Committee to consider

In considering this amendment, IPPN reflected on other aspects of school admissions that are problematic and warrant discussion. These are summarised as follows:

1. In some areas of the country, primary schools are oversubscribed and schools' admissions policies are under scrutiny. The more clarity there is in relation to the criteria schools can/must apply, the easier it is for schools to manage admissions.
2. Parental choice in their children's education is enshrined in the Irish Constitution. Parents have different reasons for choosing specific schools. Most choose the closest school regardless of patronage, a smaller number make the decision based on patronage, others base the decision on the address of the school, or the perceived socio-economic status of the school.
3. In some cases, there is capacity in an area of growth but, due to parental choice, a particular school is favoured and over-subscribed, while another may have spare capacity.
4. The fairest way to ensure that every child gains access to a local school at an appropriate age, while also respecting parental choice, is through a **shared admissions policy** process, whereby children who meet the (shared) criteria are allocated a place in one of the schools, with priority being given to the older children, including siblings of enrolled pupils.
5. There is a particular issue of oversubscription for school places in areas of significant growth. An example was the rapid population growth in Dublin 15 in the early 2000s and the consequent pressures on schools in the area to meet the demand for places.
6. In the case of Dublin 15, some of the schools under the Catholic patron implemented (in the early 2000s) a shared admissions policy, which worked well.
7. One of the key challenges to the implementation of shared admissions policies into the future will be the need for, and a means of implementing, shared, multi-patron admissions policies.
8. The learning from previous experience indicates that a 'shared admissions' approach can be successful but requires skilled facilitation at local level.
9. The Department's stated aim to have 400 schools divested from denominational to multi-denominational or non-denominational ethos by 2030 suggests there will be more focus on the need for collaboration among patron bodies in the years ahead. It must be noted that

there is no national or regional process through which collaboration on issues such as shared admissions can be facilitated across patron bodies.

10. It is valid to ask how choice of patronage/parental choice could possibly be respected under a multi-patron shared admissions process. It can - If the schools apply the criteria of oldest children first, the children who get offered a place in one of the local schools but not in their school of first choice can defer until the next year when they will be older and more likely to be offered a place in the school of first choice (under oldest first criteria). Crucially, this type of policy also ensures that new schools will only be built when all local capacity is utilised.
11. Possible approaches to a Shared Admissions Policy include:
 - One patron – Multiple parishes / catchment areas
 - Multiple patrons – One catchment area
12. An independent facilitation service such as the inspectorate or Section 29 facilitators would be required to co-ordinate the process and support the schools for any of the above to work successfully.

It is worth noting that IPPN has raised this matter with the GIS section in the Department, which is tasked with planning for capacity in schools based on demographic data. It is our understanding that it has also been brought to the attention of other sections of the Department for their consideration.

Recommendations

1. IPPN recommends that a meeting of primary stakeholders be convened by the Committee to discuss how a shared admissions process might be a better approach to resolving capacity issues in primary schools. This meeting would ideally include all of the primary management bodies, the National Parents' Council and IPPN.
2. Other relevant admissions-related challenges that affect the primary education sector may be surfaced as part of this discussion, for example around capacity to meet the demand for places in special classes, special schools and schools that provide education trí mheán na Gaeilge.

IPPN would be happy to clarify or discuss the points presented here with the Committee.