

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS SCILEANNA

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

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*Dé Máirt, 7 Feabhra 2017*

*Tuesday, 7 February 2017*

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The Joint Committee met at 4 p.m.

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#### MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Joan Burton,	Senator Robbie Gallagher,
Deputy Thomas Byrne,	Senator Alice-Mary Higgins,*
Deputy Ciarán Cannon,	Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh.
Deputy Catherine Martin,	

\* In the absence of Senator Lynn Ruane.

In attendance: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

DEPUTY FIONA O'LOUGHLIN IN THE CHAIR.

*The joint committee met in private session until 16.20 p.m.*

### **Equal Status (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016: Discussion**

**Chairman:** We will resume the meeting in public session. Today's meeting of the joint committee forms part of the committee's scrutiny of the Equal Status (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016. I welcome Mr. John Irwin, assistant general secretary, and Ms Antoinette Nic Gearailt, president, from the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools; Mr. Seamus Mulconry, general secretary, and Ms Miriam McCabe, education adviser, from the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association; Mr. Caoimhín Ó hEaghra and Mr. Tomás Ó Póil from An Foras Pátrúnachta; Dr. Ken Fennelly and Ms Linda Rainsberry from the General Synod Board of Education of the Church of Ireland; Ms Fardus Sultan and Ms Asiya Al-Tawash from the Muslim Primary Education Board; and Mr. John Curtis, general secretary, and Fr. Paul Connell, president, from the Joint Managerial Body. I know Mr. Ó Póil very well from all his work with Gaelscoil Chill Dara and Gaelcholaiste Chill Dara.

I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I also advise witnesses that the opening submissions and statements they have provided us with will be published on the committee website following this meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I thank the witnesses for the written submissions we received. We will ask one person from each organisation to make an opening statement of between two to three minutes.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I must leave to go to the Dáil for a very short period - probably during some of the opening statements.

**Chairman:** That is fine. The Deputy told us in private session that he needs to put an important question to the Minister so he will be absent for that period of time. However, he will have the opportunity to catch up later. I propose to take short statements. Members will then have an opportunity to put questions or queries or make comments. The witnesses will then have an opportunity respond to those questions. I now call on Mr. John Irwin to make his opening statement followed by the other groups as they are seated.

**Mr. John Irwin:** I thank the committee for the invitation to attend here today. The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, ACCS, is the management body representing 96 post-primary schools in Ireland. Of those post-primary schools, 14 are comprehensive

schools and 82 are community schools. There is a slight difference between both. Comprehensive schools are designated as either Protestant or Catholic comprehensive schools. All of our schools are joint patronage. The majority of community schools have a religious trustee and an education and training board, ETB, as a trustee. The latest two community schools to open have an ETB and Educate Together as trustees. The model is a community-led management structure which involves representation from within the staff, the community itself and the trustees who form the schools.

By their nature, all community schools are multidenominational. We encourage all schools to have open and transparent admissions policies. The problem that is arising, which is described in this admissions Bill, would affect some of our comprehensive schools but would really only apply where there is over-subscription within the schools, which represents a small proportion of the schools nationally. Some comprehensive schools will have religion as a criterion for priority on initial enrolment but none of the community schools will have it as a criterion of enrolment. The schools aim to meet the needs of the entire community. One will find, as was shown in the ESRI research from 2013, that the main criterion for people being involved in our schools is the locality in which they lived. That was the first criterion of choice of parents when they were asked. The main reason parents were selecting particular schools was the quality of the school over any other factor. It was the key factor. Religion was quite low in the pecking order for most of the schools as a reason for selecting the particular type of school. The ESRI report from 2013 would indicate that this seems to be across the board and that it was a very strong aspect for some people in selection of school but was not predominant across all schools.

There is a rural-urban divide here. Very often in rural primary and post-primary schools, over-subscription is not the same issue as is occurring in some of the larger urban areas. In those areas, our schools accept all students of their community. The ACCS very much supports the objectives of the Bill in respect of bringing transparency and clarity to the area of admissions and is strongly supportive of the Bill. Our aim is to try to meet the needs of all students in the community. There is a statement within the deed of trust in all community schools that two hours of religious education is provided for. There is also a statement that parents or a student over the age of 18 may withdraw. For community schools, we would be quite supportive of the idea that in any future admissions policy, there would be an explicit statement as to what the provision would be for all students in that particular category. We do feel that it may have potential resource implications, obviously, and alternatives would have to be considered. I do not think recreation or study is necessarily the preferred option.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Irwin for his opening statement. I now call on Mr. Seamus Mulconry to make his statement.

**Mr. Seamus Mulconry:** My name is Seamus Mulconry and I am the general secretary of the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association. I am joined today by my colleague, Ms Miriam McCabe, one of our education advisers and a principal with 24 years teaching experience, 15 of those as the principal of a school in Oldcastle, County Meath. We are the support organisation for over 2,800 schools and almost 23,000 members of boards of management. We provide advice to schools on a wide range of issues, ranging from admissions to HR, finance, parental complaints, bullying and the myriad of other issues faced by schools. We also provide training to boards of management and last year held 33 training sessions. We represent boards in discussions with the Department of Education and Skills and other stakeholders.

There are three fundamental points I would like to make about the legislation before us. We

have been invited here to comment on the Equal Status (Admissions to Schools) Bill 2016. The first fundamental point I want to make on this issue is that no Catholic school wishes to exclude any child from the benefits of a Catholic education. In almost 95% of our schools, we take everyone who applies. Our schools are welcoming and diverse, dedicated to the full development of the child and not to indoctrination. The school that my child attends is a pretty good example. It basically reflects the geographical area in which it is situated. It takes everyone and all comers.

The second point is that the difficulties schools, parents and pupils face are really about resources and not religion. There is a growing issue of oversubscription found mainly in the Dublin area and the commuter belt, such as Meath and Kildare, but that sometimes flares up in other locations. We have been looking at this issue for a while. Last year, we identified about 21 schools in the greater Dublin area in which there were problems with oversubscription. This year we have identified 42. In 17 of those schools, there was an issue with baptism. That equates to about 1.2% of rejected applications. I will give the committee the figures. There were approximately 26,968 applications to Catholic primary schools that completed a survey for us. Of these, 19,218 were successful. Of the remainder, only 1.2% were unsuccessful due to an issue with a baptismal cert. The key point I am making is that this issue is really about a lack of school places in some geographical locations. The Bill before us is an admissions Bill. It will not add one school place. It will not solve the problem. The fundamental issue I would point out is resources. We need to investigate what is really going on in terms of oversubscription. We need to identify where extra school places are needed and put them in as a matter of urgency.

The Bill itself is a little bit unclear. It does not define the catchment area, which is core to what the Bill is about, nor does it define how a school can prove that it has taken in sufficient numbers of its own denomination to prove that it has satisfied local need. These are two big areas. We have a real concern that if the Bill goes through, it will not solve the problems we are facing but could create a field day for lawyers who would have a merry time trying to figure out loopholes and could pit schools against each other. If schools are allowed to define their catchment areas, there is nothing to say that catchment areas could not overlap. For this reason, we believe the Bill is premature and we urge the committee to investigate what is going on with oversubscription in the greater Dublin area.

**Chairman:** I thank the witness for that thought-provoking submission. I now call Mr. Caoimhín Ó hEaghra. I apologise for previously mispronouncing his surname.

**Mr. Caoimhín Ó hEaghra:** Tá sé sin ceart go leor. Gabhann an Foras Pátrúnachta buíochas leis an gcoiste as ucht an cuireadh ár seasamh agus ár dtuairimí i leith na ceiste fíorthábhachtaí seo dár mbunscoileanna agus dár meánscoileanna a chur faoi bhráid an choiste agus a phlé. Fáiltíonn an Foras Pátrúnachta roimh chóras iontrála a chinnteodh uileghabhálacht, oscailteacht agus trédhearcacht, córas a d'fhéadfadh muintir na tíre a bheith muiníneach as. Is bunchlocha an Bhille iad na prionsabail sin.

Is cúis inní don Fhoras Pátrúnachta nach bhfuil suntas tugtha sa Bhille seo ná i ráitis an Aire le déanaí don gcomhthéacs ar leith ina fheidhmíonn Gaelscoileanna i gcoitinne agus na scoileanna faoinár bpátrúnacht go háirithe. Ní fheictear dúinn go mbeidh sé de chead ag scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge tosaíocht a thabhairt do pháistí atá á dtógáil trí Ghaeilge, bíodh sí mar theanga teaghlaigh nó mar theanga tuismitheora nó caomhnóra amháin, nó tosaíocht a thabhairt do dhaltáí atá ag aistriú ó bhunscoil lán-Ghaeilge go meánscoil lán-Ghaeilge ach oiread. Máimid go mba chóir aitheantas a thabhairt do seo sa Bhille. Tuigim go bhfuilimid á phlé i leith abhan-

trach, ach ceapaim go bhfuil sé tábhachtach na pointí seo a ardú maidir le páistí atá á thógáil le Gaeilge chomh maith céanna.

An cúlra a bhaineann le seo ná go nglactar faoi láthair le gach iarrthóir i gcás gach ceann dár scoileanna a bhfuil spás iontu, agus leanfar leis an gcleachtas sin. Mar a thagair Seamus Mulconry dó níos tuisce, is easpa soláthair atá mar fhadhb bhunúsach leis an gceist seo. De bharr easpa soláthair i roinnt ceantar, áfach, tá sé dosheachanta go bhfuil ró-éileamh i roinnt dár scoileanna. Cruthaíonn sé míshastacht i measc tuismitheoirí nach féidir leo oideachas lán-Ghaeilge a fháil dá bpáistí agus téann sé i gcoinne ár mbeartais shonraithe oideachas lán-Ghaeilge a chur ar fáil do gach dalta sa tír a roghnaíonn é agus ár scoileanna a bheith uileghabháilte agus oscailte.

Creidimid mar sin gur chuid mhór den réiteach ná breis scoileanna agus breis scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge a bhunú ionas go mbeidh fáil ag páistí na tíre ar an gcineál oideachais seo. Tá tacaíocht tras-pháirtí ann do Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-2030. Creidimid gur croílár chur i bhfeidhm na straitéise sin í an Ghaelscolaíocht. Ní mór don Bhille seo an straitéis a thacú agus a laidriú.

Maidir leis an gceist faoi pháistí atá á dtógáil le Gaeilge, feidhmíonn scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge chun oideachas a chur ar fáil, go bunúsach, chun pobal Gaeilge a fhorbairt agus chun freastal ar theaghlaigh atá ag tógáil a bpáistí trí Ghaeilge. Is mionlach an-bheag iad na teaghlaigh lán-Ghaeilge laistigh den chóras oideachais lán-Ghaeilge. Suim de 3% atá i gceist. Tá sé andúshlánach páistí a thógáil le Gaeilge gan na tacaíochtaí cuí a bheith ar fáil ón Stát. Léirítear trí thaighde gur cheann de na tacaíochtaí is tábhachtaí do theaghlaigh atá ag tógáil clainne le Gaeilge é an córas oideachais.

Cuireann oideachas lán-Ghaeilge le cumas Gaeilge agus Béarla an pháiste atá á thógáil sa mhionteanga, is é sin, an Ghaeilge. Léiríonn taighde nach bhfuil sé seo fíor má tá ar an bpáiste sin freastal ar scoil Bhéarla. Dá bhrí sin, tá sé de dhualgas orainn áit a sholáthar don pháiste seo. Dátheangachas suimitheach seachas dealaitheach atá uainn. Tacaíonn páistí ó theaghlaigh lán-Ghaeilge le pobal na scoile uile tríd a líofacht, a n-úsáid nádúrtha den teanga agus trí léiriú beo do na páistí eile gur rud nádúrtha í an teanga a thabhairt i ngach gné dá saoil. Spreagann siad agus tacaíonn siad le na páistí eile.

Feidhmíonn scoileanna an Fhorais Phátrúnachta i gcomhthéacs ar leith sa chúis is go soláthraíonn siad éagsúlacht chultúrtha agus teanga trí mheán na teanga mar aon le héagsúlacht shainspioraid, beag beann ar aicme, creideamh, eitneacht nó ceantar tríd ár gcóras tumoid-eachais. Feicfidh daltaí gur rud nádúrtha é dóibh féin, dá scoileanna agus dá dteaghlaigh a bheith mar chuid de shochaí Ghaeilge agus Ghaelach.

Chun oideachas lán-Ghaeilge den scoth a sholáthar, chun pobal Gaeilge a fhorbairt agus chun freastal ar theaghlaigh lán-Ghaeilge, feictear dúinn gur riachtanach na céimeanna a leanas: i gcás na scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge a bhfuil ró-éileamh orthu, go mbeidh sé de cheart acu tosaíocht a thabhairt do pháistí a bhfuil an Ghaeilge mar theanga theaghlaigh acu agus an critéar seo a chur ina mbeartas iontrála; agus i gcás meánscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge a bhfuil ró-éileamh orthu, go mbeidh sé de chead acu tosaíocht a thabhairt do pháistí a bhfuil an Ghaeilge mar theanga theaghlaigh nó do pháistí atá ag freastal ar bhunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge.

Mar sin, iarraidimid ar an gcoiste dul i gcion ar leasú agus ar chur i bhfeidhm an Bhille seo sa chúis is go mbeidh cead ag scoil lán-Ghaeilge critéir a thugann tosaíocht do pháistí a bhfuil Gaeilge acu a leagan amach agus iad a chur i bhfeidhm sa chás go mbíonn ró-éileamh ar an scoil. Is cosaint bhunúsach é seo ar an gcóras tumoideachais agus rud a chinnteoidh inmheart-

each na teanga.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Ó hEaghra. A translation has been submitted and will be available on the committee's website for those who wish to read his contribution in English.

**Dr. Ken Fennelly:** I thank the Chairman and members of the joint committee for the invitation to address them. We represent the Church of Ireland Board of Education, the primary school management advisory service for 197 primary schools under ten Church of Ireland patrons, as well as Presbyterian, Methodist and Quaker Society of Friends schools. There are a further 25 post-primary schools under Church of Ireland and wider Protestant management and patronage. I am joined by Ms Linda Rainsberry, chair of the board of governors of Kilkenny College. Kilkenny College is a voluntary secondary school in the free scheme which serves the Church of Ireland and Protestant population in nine counties in the south east. Ms Rainsberry will be happy to speak to the committee about how a restrictive regulation on catchment areas would affect a Protestant boarding school serving practically all of Leinster outside Dublin.

The committee will be aware that there are three separate matters to do with school admissions in train - the Bill brought forward by Deputy Joan Burton and the Labour Party, the Education (Admissions to School) Bill 2016 and the consultation process on school admissions with the Department for Education and Skills. We note that section 61(2)(b) of the Education (Admissions to School) Bill 2016 contains a specific reference to section 7(3)(c) of the Equal Status Act 2000. This Bill seems to link the religious denominational criteria with the school catchment area but without reference to the Education (Admissions to School) Bill 2016 and neither is being considered in the context of the ongoing consultation process with the Department for Education and Skills that has as one of the options amendment of section 7 (3)(c) of the Equal Status Act 2000.

In her comments to the Dáil in introducing this Bill I notice that Deputy Joan Burton made reference to the importance of the prioritisation of and the derogation in section 7(3)(c) of the Equal Status Act 2000 for the Church of Ireland community. I thank her for that reference. Of course, none of the proposed changes, as Mr. Mulconry said, would add one school place in the education system or address the reality that the issue of oversubscription arises as a result of the shortage of school places. The other reality is that by law all children must go to school. I suggest to the committee that the National Educational Welfare Board and Tusla are best placed to advise it on the numbers of children not in school on 30 September in any given year which would give it a picture on oversubscription. There is a very real risk of inconsistency on the issue of school admissions. We suggest to the committee that there is a need for a sense of order and calm to be brought to the issue in general. In that regard, we echo the view of the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, the CPSMA, that it is premature to consider advancing this Bill until the Minister has concluded his consultations on the four options he has put forward and until the legislative process on the Education (Admissions to School) Bill 2016 has concluded. I would like to refer briefly to the second proposal made in the Bill which relates to religious education. The Bill seeks to direct schools on the delivery of the religious education curriculum. At primary level religious education is delivered in schools on behalf of the patron in the discretionary part of the curriculum. There is no difficulty with the provision on withdrawal which is already provided for in the Constitution. I am wondering, therefore, why it needs to be repeated in primary legislation. Perhaps that might be clarified. The other provision seems to echo the provision on religious instruction which appears in section 61(h) of the Education (Admissions to School) Bill 2016. If the expectation of the Legislature is that schools are to provide an alternative curriculum or additional supervision resources, this would

create a substantial cost to the State. Has it been costed? Has the issue been discussed with the teacher unions? The primary and post-primary teacher unions will have an interest in it, given that the Bill refers to both sectors. I note that some commentators on this issue seem to assume that children could just be let home from school 30 minutes early if religious education was to be moved to the end of the school day. They could not. By law, all children must spend the same length of time in school. Members will be aware that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the NCCA, is conducting consultations with school patrons on current time allocations for religious education and the curriculum in general. It is our view that the provisions included in this Bill would interfere with the work of the NCCA. We suggest to the committee that on this ground alone it would also be premature to advance this Bill at this time until these consultations are concluded.

I again thank the Chairman and members for inviting us. As I mentioned, my colleague, Ms Rainsberry, is available to provide further more detailed information on how catchment area restrictions would affect one of our 25 second level schools which also happens to be a boarding school.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. Fennelly. In the second round we will be delighted to receive Ms Rainsberry's extra clarification. I understand the representatives of the Muslim Primary Education Board do not wish to make a submission.

**Ms Asiya Al-Tawash:** We have a statement.

**Chairman:** My apologies; I was informed that there would be no statement. We will be delighted to hear it. Perhaps a copy might be furnished to all members in order that we will have it for our records and also that we will have it on the website.

**Ms Asiya Al-Tawash:** We will do so.

On behalf of the Muslim Primary Education Board, we are grateful to have the opportunity to give the perspective of the Muslim community on the subject of admissions to schools in Ireland. We only became aware of this hearing this morning. As far as we can ascertain, we received no prior notification. As such, this opening statement was only drafted this morning.

**Chairman:** On a point of clarification, an invitation was issued to Mr. Shaheen Ahmed who was to come. He only recently indicated that Ms Al-Tawash would be coming instead.

**Ms Asiya Al-Tawash:** We did not realise there was an invitation; we had not seen it.

The Muslim Primary Education Board is a voluntary body which represents Muslim primary schools in Dublin, but it also seeks to speak on behalf of the thousands of Muslim children attending school in Ireland. According to the 2011 census, there were almost 50,000 Muslims living in Ireland, including over 8,000 children in primary schools and 3,500 in secondary schools. The vast majority of these children attend local schools, but in recent years parents have found it increasingly difficult to obtain school places for their children, particularly in the secondary sector.

The current estimate of the Muslim population in Ireland is approximately 65,000, which represents an increase of almost 30% since 2011. This is an indicator that the numbers of Muslim children entering the education system are growing very rapidly. Parents have encountered a number of problems at the point of admission to schools. They include the requirement to have a baptismal certificate. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many non-practising Catholic

parents, people of no faith, as well as Muslim parents, face the same obstacle. While other parents can, if they so wish, obtain a baptismal certificate, this is not an option for Muslims. From the outset it is an obstacle for the Muslim community.

The current admission policy may also ignore local catchment areas in preference of admitting children of a particular faith. Under the current system, schools have refused Muslim children from feeder schools, siblings who have established links with the school and children in local catchment areas, citing school admission policies that prioritise the children of one faith over another. The situation is that the majority of schools in Ireland have a Catholic ethos, leaving Muslim children at the mercy of admission policies that seriously curtail parental and student choice. Many Muslim parents, especially from newer communities, are unfamiliar with the Irish education system which causes additional barriers in understanding varied and unclear admission policies.

The implications of the policy are the imposition of seriously limited choice for parents and students and inequality of access to education, which may lead to long-term implications with regard to the exclusion of Muslims in Ireland from social, economic and civic engagement. A number of psychological reports indicate a link between educational achievement and a child's sense of belonging. A feeling of being excluded or unwanted is not conducive to integration or a child's well-being. Those schools with a more open admission policy, which we welcome, are left to cater for large groups of Muslim students, instead of integration being encouraged throughout the school system.

The Minister's recent proposals contain some elements which the Muslim Primary Education Board would support. The removal of the baptismal requirement would allow a more equitable basis of admission and the establishment of catchment areas allowing Muslim students to attend their local schools. When children from the same locality attend school together it creates a bond, strengthens local communities and encourages religious diversity and cultural tolerance. It would also prohibit the practice of maintaining an ethos by preferring children from outside a catchment area. The maintenance of a school's ethos should not be based on 100% of the student population being of one faith. Rather, it needs to reflect the diversity in Irish society. An admission policy should safeguard and respect the child's rights to religious practice.

We would like to clearly state that parents and students should have a choice with regard to religious and non-religious education. To ignore the religious ethos of any school as a blanket policy is not a strategy we would support. We firmly believe the way forward in education should be to seek a balance between ethos and diversity. A school community should reflect wider society in its pupil cohort and its staff.

**Chairman:** Despite the communication issues which arose, I assure Ms Al-Tawash that her voice and the voice of the children and students she represents are very important in this debate. We were very clear when we set about organising who we would invite as witnesses that the voice of the Muslim community certainly would be included.

**Ms Asiya Al-Tawash:** There was just some miscommunication.

**Chairman:** That is absolutely fine. I invite Mr. Curtis of the Joint Management Body, JMB, to address the committee.

**Mr. John Curtis:** I thank the committee for the invitation. Committee members will be

glad to know I will not go through what we submitted in full detail. I will give an abridged version and take questions afterwards. I am conscious everybody has a copy of our submission. I am joined by my colleague, the president of the Joint Management Body, Fr. Paul Connell.

The JMB was founded in 1972 to represent the interests of all voluntary secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland. It is the main decision-making and negotiating body for the management authorities of almost 380 voluntary secondary schools. The JMB comprises two founding organisations, namely, the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools, AMC-SS, and the Irish School Heads' Association, ISA, which represents Protestant schools in the State.

With a combined enrolment of more than 185,000 students, admission policies and practices in voluntary secondary schools can only be described as inclusive, compliant and, essentially, unproblematic. It is the position of the JMB that the results of the Department's audit of enrolment policies in 2008, indicating no evidence of any system-wide enrolment practices that give rise to concern, should inform the present consideration, and the high levels of integrity with which our schools have been exercising their responsibilities should be acknowledged. Only 20% of our schools are oversubscribed. The JMB believes the existing system works well, with relatively few section 29 appeals against refusal to enrol each year, of which only a small proportion are successful.

In the context of oversubscription challenges, no legislation can change the fact that in some areas throughout the country there is a shortage of school places. We acknowledge this. We maintain that schools, like families, are not solely operational entities. They thrive on relationships, values, continuity, local community cohesion and loyalties built up over time. Allowance must be made for this at local operational level. We accept that oversubscription is a difficult issue. There cannot, and never will, be general agreement on the fairest criteria in these circumstances. Appropriate weight must be given to the principle of subsidiarity, which suggests matters ought to be handled by the most local competent authority, in this case the school board of management.

With regard specifically to the proposed amendment, the JMB very much welcomes the State's requirement for every school to have a transparent and legally compliant enrolment policy, although it should be noted that catchment might be problematic in our sector. The proposed amendment does not appear to directly challenge the constitutional protections afforded to either the denominational character of a school or the right of the pupil not to attend religious instruction. It does, however, introduce the notion of the separability of religious instruction from the secular. The JMB sees this distinction as completely untenable in terms of the lived out ethos of the school. Faith schools intentionally set out to permeate the day to day life of their schools with a set of values, relationships, visible reminders, policies and curricular frameworks which cannot be divided into religious versus secular paradigms.

We are very grateful to have the opportunity to engage in this debate. Like my colleagues Dr. Fennelly and Mr. Mulconry, we very much look forward to engagement with the Minister on the admission to schools Bill because much teasing out needs to be done before we proceed with it.

**Chairman:** I thank all of the witnesses for their statements. We will have an opportunity for clarification. Many of the witnesses addressed the need for more resources as this issue arises in 20% of schools. It is true to say the point was well made that not a single extra school place will be created by virtue of the Bill or any amendment to it, and this must be borne in mind.

We also have the issue of resources required for opt out options from religion classes and the challenges this poses for schools.

The Gaelscoileanna have a particular issue, which is very understandable. It is a different type of challenge to those in religious and non-religious schools. Collectively we will have to look at the issue and pose the question to ourselves as to whether it is right that any child in any modern European society is denied access to any particular school because of religion. Certainly in the society we have in Ireland I do not think this should be the case. It concerns me that 1.2% of children who applied have not been given places because of their religion. This is a relatively high figure. We need to look at the disadvantages and advantages of holding religious classes outside of school hours, and the resourcing of this is important. A total of 90% of our primary schools are run by Catholic patronage with 6% under Church of Ireland patronage. We have a much wider and more diverse population at this point in time. Resources come into play with regard to the opt-out options. I say that as a former teacher who taught religion for many years and really enjoyed teaching it. I was very conscious of situations where children were left at the back of the class. In a way, those children were isolated. I will hand over to members of the committee. I presume Deputy Burton would like to respond first.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** I thank everybody for coming in and sharing their experiences and views on this matter with the committee. I apologise for arriving somewhat late but I was speaking in the Dáil earlier. My approach to this is governed by my experience on the ground so I will not concentrate on constitutional issues *per se* except to say that we went to a lot of trouble to get legal advice, as we have done over a long period of years, in respect of the difficult question of how we have a primary and secondary school system that is welcoming to every child but which follows the constitutional requirements regarding parents' choices in respect of children and parents and children having religious affiliations, which we respect, and also takes note of the development of communities and an integrated, if very diverse, society. I represent Dublin West, which is the area around Blanchardstown, Castleknock and Mulhuddart. According to the last census, it is probably the most diverse part of Ireland. Over 30% of the population were not born in Ireland or have parents who were not born in Ireland. When we talk about areas where there may be competition for school places, that competition may also mean that parents from different countries around the world are applying on behalf of their children because they have come to live in Ireland. Like many outer suburbs of our big cities, Dublin 15 ranges from being quite diverse to being very diverse. This extends into the commuter belts around the big cities. I am sure the Chairman will be familiar with that.

There are three issues at play here. One is the constitutional requirement regarding freedom of religion and freedom of expression of religion and the Constitution's recognition that parents are the educators of their child. Our Bill seeks to accommodate and recognise that fully. The second issue is how one avoids discrimination against children where people of a particular religion apply in sufficient numbers yet in the general area, there is a more diverse population. The second question is how you accommodate and recognise diversity. In a situation where there is no pressure on school places, I would be the first to say that by and large, it is not a huge issue for people. It may well be that, ultimately, parents find practices in schools that they do not particularly like or they are at odds with some of their views but by and large, I would be the first to acknowledge that this is significantly tied up with the issue of pressure on school places and the pressure of population growth in certain areas. The third issue that arises is geography. If people are in a recognised geographical area, which could be a school enrolment district or, as was traditionally identified in Ireland, a parish or townland area, how do you give all of the children living in that area access to their local national school even though that school may

have a particular denominational affiliation and patronage?

I have been dealing with this issue with all of the different communities in Dublin West for at least 15 years. I pay tribute to almost all of the patron bodies. I would not have dealt with everybody here but I would have dealt with many patron bodies, as would other public representatives in the area. By and large, patrons in Ireland, boards of management and teachers have sought to ensure that every child is welcome; that as far as possible, there is an accommodation of diversity; and that where there is rationing of places because of enormous increases in population, which is where the difficulties arise, it is done in a fair way that is not discriminatory. I appreciate that for religious denominations like the Church of Ireland, the issue is the balance between ethos, diversity, welcome and openness, particularly for small schools. We said this in our submission. I thank Dr. Fennelly for acknowledging that. We are very aware of it because much of what we expressed in the Bill is the expression of experience in dealing with the front line of these issues for modern Ireland.

I have been very influenced by the approaches of different members of the clergy from different denominations I have encountered. In that context, I will digress briefly. Before Christmas, an outstanding Catholic priest, Fr. Martin Murnaghan, died. Over a long period of time, Fr. Murnaghan was the parish priest in St. Mochta's parish in Porterstown. This is an immensely diverse area with three different schools that, ultimately, established a practice whereby they would have different kinds of quotas notwithstanding the fact that two of the schools were Catholic schools while the other - Scoil Choilm community national school - was a late formation school that was under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin for a number of years and then became one of the first ETB-based community national schools. The other schools were St. Patrick's national school and St. Mochta's national school. One of the schools was in Diswellstown while the other covered the broader area. Fr. Murnaghan and his successor, Fr. John Daly, came up with something like a 30% quota allocation based on all the normal considerations of application, the dates, identifying the school of choice, filling in the application form, attending at the school and the parents applying. That model has been applied in a number of different areas but if I am correct, it has been adopted by a school board and perhaps the patron by agreement. I am not sure if it applies everywhere or whether there is any guarantee that this model can apply because even within that model, there is quite a heightened consciousness among numbers of parents that the baptismal requirement is also required. I do not know whether any scientific study has been carried out but it is certainly an issue of concern to parents. Increasingly, as pressure on places has increased in recent years, this issue has come more to the fore. Other members of the committee might have more experience of how this has been applied in other parts of the country.

In fact, if the Department of Education and Skills has more information on what the composition of the student population in different schools has been, that might be quite helpful because there are parts of the country which are not so diverse and there are other parts which are very diverse. If, for example, one takes 1992 to 1994, the Bosnian community first came to Ireland in significant numbers arising from the consequences of the war. That resulted in several hundred families settling in Dublin West. I would think that almost all of those children experienced their education in schools of different religious denominations. That community could speak for itself, but I think every effort was made to be inclusive. Nonetheless, our Bill reflects the fact that we have now moved on in time and there are points where there are difficulties, notwithstanding very good practices which are there which I would like to acknowledge and the very caring approach by so many of the patrons, boards of management and teachers. Our Bill seeks to provide a balance between the constitutional rights regarding religion and

the recognition of non-discrimination in respect of children. We have set out an explanatory memorandum to the Bill which sets out many of the legal arguments in some detail.

Way back in 1996, when Ireland was really not what one might call a very diverse society - I think the Vikings were among the most recent people to have arrived to come and live in Ireland - the Constitution Review Group said:

...suppose that there is one small national school (and therefore in receipt of public funds) which is run by a Catholic religious order and where the school population heretofore consisted exclusively of Catholic pupils. Members of the Islamic community move into the area and have no realistic alternative but to send their children to the local national school. The parents of these children not only insist on withdrawing their children from formal religious instruction but also object to the Roman Catholic ethos which permeates instruction in other subjects in the school-----

Now this is 1996 so we are talking about a rather different situation in a lot of schools then. The quote continues:

-----and is also reflected in, for example, religious pictures and school holidays for religious feast days. Must a school which is in receipt of public moneys accede to these objections, or may it give preference to the wishes of the majority of parents who wish the school to retain its Catholic ethos?

When one thinks that was 1996 it was a very far-sighted judge who wrote that. It does still reflect some of the delicate issues and our legislation seeks to address those issues while maintaining the capacity for religious preference. The law has moved on in practice and practice has moved on. This is illustrated by the development of a whole sector of multi-denominational schools and by the fact that An Foras Patrúnachta now recognises Gaelscoileanna which may have a Catholic ethos, those which may have a multi-denominational ethos and, I think, those which may have a non-denominational ethos. We have moved on a great deal in our practice but there is still an issue to address and I welcome the opportunity to address it. If people would like to ask me any further questions I am happy to respond.

Considering that we now have a significant population of teenagers and children coming into the teenage years who have settled in Ireland, who have been born in Ireland or whose parents have settled in Ireland, it is absolutely vital for us as a society that they get the best education possible and that they have an extremely positive educational experience that respects them, as well as them respecting the people among whom they are now living. In that way we may avoid some of the mistakes that other societies have made and can strive to be an inclusive and welcoming society.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** Go raibh maith agat a Chathaoirleach. I welcome the witnesses this afternoon. I enjoyed their presentations and statements and found them very informative. It is a useful exercise and I am sure they themselves enjoyed the statements and contributions from their colleagues around the table.

In the part of the world that I come from this particular issue is in many ways a foreign land. We do not have this problem. It is actually the complete opposite. As one drives around the boreens of County Monaghan or County Donegal, where I come from, one constantly sees billboards for schools that are having open days. They are encouraging parents and children to come along to those open nights so that the school can display its wares. It is a new and welcome development that has come to light in recent years. Although I do not doubt its sincerity, it is important that we get a sense of perspective on this particular debate. We should recognise

that we have a problem but also that, thankfully, the problem is very much confined to certain areas. Those areas have been highlighted here this afternoon.

The issue is fundamentally about resources. It is about lack of school places which, as I said, is the complete opposite to the experience we have in rural Ireland. I would say in most parts of rural Ireland the experience would be similar to that which I have outlined. I think it was Dr. Fennelly who used the words order and calm in his contribution. They are very apt in this particular debate. It is important that we, as a committee, listen to all sides. We should keep a sense of perspective in relation to the actual problem and its size but should not ignore the fact that in some instances there is a problem. It is important that we address that. I would like to think that a consensus would be arrived at and eventually we will reach a model that will cater for the small numbers not being accommodated at the moment.

Fundamentally, and I will repeat this, this is a resources issue. We need to increase resources to the areas that have the problem. Until we do that we are only tinkering with the symptoms of the problem not actually dealing with the problem itself. The witnesses can all be very proud of the educational system generally, in addition to the education that is delivered to our young people and indeed our adults of today. I know in County Monaghan, for example, we have experienced a big influx of foreign nationals from eastern Europe over the past 15 years or so. They now make up approximately 12% to 13% of the population of Monaghan and in Monaghan town that figure increases to 30%. I am glad to report that they have all been accommodated within the school network that currently exists. It goes to show that if the resources are there people can be accommodated.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I apologise that I had to leave during the meeting and that I missed some of the contributions. Some, including Dr. Fennelly in his submission, have raised the fact that the Minister is having his own consultations and we are having our discussions separately. People have raised this with me privately too. The answer to that is that the Minister has no control over this committee. We are the legislative body and we are legislating. The Minister can have whatever consultation he wants. I hope it is useful. I certainly would be interested in reading the submissions but legislation will be passed here. That is why we have continued with our deliberations. The Minister has no legislative function in this committee. Whatever he proposes is simply a proposal. That is why it is important we hear the witnesses, but I certainly will want to read the submissions. There is no question about that.

I know that some, including Mr. Mulconry, have raised questions about catchment areas. Can I dwell on that issue for a moment and see what are the pros and cons of catchment areas and whether anybody has strong views on them? Is that possible?

**Chairman:** That is fine. I think Ms Rainsberry will comment on it-----

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** How it will affect each particular group of the joint management body, the Catholic primary schools, the Islamic schools, the Church of Ireland schools, na Gaelscoileanna and the community schools? I want to tease that out. I do not really have any other questions.

**Chairman:** That is absolutely key. I call Deputy Catherine Martin.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I apologise for being late and missing the contributions of the witnesses but I have read the written statements that were submitted beforehand. I have a couple of questions. Ar dtús, maidir le hionchur an Fhorais Pátrúnachta, aontaím gur chóir tús áite

a thabhairt do dhaltaí na nGaelscoileanna. Sílim go bhfuil riachtanas ann go ndéanfadh Rialtas na tíre agus polaiteoirí na dTithe uaisle seo gach iarracht chun gur féidir linn an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn ar fud an oileáin seo. Cabhróidh an réamhamharc seo le coincheap an tumoideachais agus le todhchaí na teanga sa lá ata inniu ann mar theanga náisiúnta agus mar mhionteanga de chuid na hEorpa.

I have a general question for all the witnesses. If we could find agreement, what do they believe should be the top three criteria for admissions to schools that are oversubscribed? I would be interested to hear the variance in opinions. Is it linear distance, siblings, place on waiting lists, religion, etc.? I have a question for the Catholic Primary School Management Association, CPSMA, on the survey referenced in the submission. Of the 72 schools that did not complete the survey, were those schools concentrated in one area or spread across the greater Dublin area? Of the 1.2% of applications - approximately 80 - that were refused over issues relating to a baptism certificate, were those applications concentrated in a specific area? This is an issue that is regularly raised with me by parents in the constituency of Dublin-Rathdown. How is the ESRI's 20% figure for oversubscription explained? It is a huge difference. Do we know what difference in the methods used in gathering the data might have given such results?

**Chairman:** We are delighted that Senator Alice-Mary Higgins has joined us.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I thank the committee for having me and all the presenters for their presentations, which I really enjoyed. I am very lucky to be able to sit in on the committee meeting today.

I have a couple of points of observation that I think might be useful as well as a couple of questions. Mr. Irwin mentioned that, in his opinion, religion was a lower concern compared to, say, location and quality for parents when making their decisions. However, we know from a particular poll that was carried out that most respondents in rural areas would prefer non-denominational options rather than religious ones if they were available. I might humbly suggest that in some senses it may not be a criterion that people are applying to their choice because the option is not available. That is not to say that it necessarily reflects a lack of concern or desire to have a non-religious or multidenominational option.

I will return to the issue of admissions but it is worth noting that Mr. Mulconry noted in his presentation that no Catholic school wishes to exclude a child from a Catholic education. The key concern is that we have many situations throughout Ireland where the only option for an education is at a Catholic institution. There is that question. We need to move to a position where no school wishes to exclude a child from an education and there may be a Catholic or other religious ethos. That is an example of why we need to move forward to ensure that, with resources, we are delivering on the commitment to 400 other multidenominational or non-denominational schools. I point out that there is an onus in the provision of education that every child should have the option to be able to access education while also exercising his or her right to not practise a religion or to practise one. The question of withdrawals was made in a number of different ways. The question of whether it needed to be specified in the Bill was raised. I would argue that it is important that it be specified and that it be clarified in the Bill because it is a key point. There is also the question of resources. There is already an implicit question of resources. If we are to recognise a child's right to not receive religious instruction, as was rightly said it is not simply that children can be sent home half an hour earlier. There is a requirement that an option would be available. The Chairman spoke eloquently about how it is not an adequate solution to have children sitting at the back of a classroom and opting out while in the same room. That is not adequate provision. I would appreciate the witnesses' thoughts

on what is adequate provision or what is an appropriate way to address the child's right to not receive religious instruction within a school. Practical proposals were put forward in the Bill but perhaps there are others. I personally would love to see philosophy as an option in schools. I am sure there are many alternatives. What are the possible proposals?

To my mind, that there were 100 refusals in the greater Dublin area does not necessarily include those who may, for example, have felt they had to produce a baptism certificate. People may have had concerns but may not have raised it as an issue. However, that there were 100 refusals is quite significant. I know that this is only a sampling and that it was different from the ESRI's sampling but it still merits consideration.

I have one other point. Ms Al-Tawash spoke eloquently about the importance of inclusion, the sense of building a community and the role a school has in both reflecting the diversity of its community and in providing a meeting point to generate positive diversity. I appreciate that role but I also appreciate some of the concerns raised by Mr. Fennelly, for example, on catchment area. I would appreciate Mr. Fennelly's thoughts on how to balance those issues. It is probably Ms Rainsberry who will address it. When she does, will she tell us how we should balance that role of schools in terms of building local cohesion and exchange?

I appreciate Mr. Ó hEaghra's presentation, which was very important. I appreciate that An Foras Pátrúnachta is working to ensure that there is a range of options available. Every child and family should have the choice of a religious, non-denominational or multid denominational option. They should also have the right to choose to be educated in their native language. That is an important right and both of those rights should not be forced into a position of compromise. I agree in terms of the question about whether Irish is a household language. I would have some concern, however, where one parent is an Irish speaker. As Mr. Ó hEaghra eloquently stated, the language is one of the deepest and most important ways to engage with the culture. We can look to where Irish is the language of a household - that is one situation - but most families in Ireland will be able to speak some words of Irish or have someone with some capacity in Irish. I would not like to see our Irish language schools under pressure in terms of resources and numbers. If we consider the number of households where Irish is spoken and also those households where one parent can speak Irish, I imagine there will always be more than enough to fill each school that becomes available. I worry about those who are coming in from new communities. We had a children's rights referendum and we want to ensure that every child has the right, regardless of their parent's capacity, to learn and to grow through Irish. It is different where Irish is spoken in the household because that is a separate right. Linking it too much to the parent passing a test, for example, might be prohibitive. I would really appreciate the witnesses' thoughts on those issues and thank them again for their presentations.

**Chairman:** I thank the Deputies and Senators. I thank Deputy Burton for the Labour Party's Bill, which sets the scene and gives us some of the background to the Bill. I propose to go back to those who have already given witness to it. I start with Ms Rainsberry and ask her to address the issue of catchment. There have been some very good observations, questions and comments. I ask her to answer the catchment query.

**Ms Linda Rainsberry:** In preparing for appearing today, I researched the speech by Deputy Joan Burton on 28 June 2016 in introducing the Bill. I welcome her statement that it is not the intention of the Legislature to destroy the denominational character of schools or to end the participation of minority faiths in the education system. In that context, it is imperative that if the catchment area criterion is to be adopted, this must be a matter to be defined by each school in its statutory admissions policy as referenced by Deputy Burton in her speech.

I chair the board of Kilkenny College, which is a Church of Ireland voluntary secondary school. It is a co-educational boarding and day school with 846 students. Approximately half, 430, are boarding pupils and 416 are day pupils. The number of pupils has increased since we joined the free scheme in 2013 and we now have approximately 100 more pupils than we had before we joined the free scheme; that has been a success for the school. Approximately three quarters of the current pupil body are from the Protestant faith background.

Kilkenny College and Protestant schools in general have a proud tradition of welcoming others from outside their own faith traditions. Kilkenny College along with many other secondary schools is in an unusual position in that there are so few Protestant secondary schools in the 26 Counties. Kilkenny College is the only Protestant secondary school in County Kilkenny and it also serves families from the neighbouring counties of Carlow, Laois, Offaly, Kildare, Tipperary and Wexford. There is no alternative Protestant secondary school in any of those counties. There are 14 counties in Ireland without a Protestant secondary school. By definition, the Protestant secondary schools that exist must draw people from a very wide catchment area.

Kilkenny College is often referred to as the diocesan college for the diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory because it is the only Church of Ireland secondary school within that diocese. Newtown School in Waterford in the diocese is a Society of Friends school. Our catchment area stretches beyond our diocese because we regularly take children from County Tipperary which is outside the diocese and towns such as Athy, Mountmellick, Roscrea, Birr or Tullamore, all of which are in different dioceses.

On a practical level, Kilkenny College is oversubscribed. The college admits 144 pupils in each first year. For the next year in which admissions are yet to be determined, 2018-19, we have 338 applications for first year, meaning almost two applicants for every place in the school. Therefore oversubscription is a very real problem for the college.

At both primary and more especially secondary level, Protestant parents who wish to have their children educated in their own faith must send their children to schools some distance away. Sometimes that distance is so great that the children require to board. Primary and secondary Protestant schools are a valuable focal point for an often-scattered minority group. It is there that children from Protestant backgrounds get to meet other children from Protestant backgrounds because they may be the only Protestant family living in their own neighbourhood. While they can obviously meet and form relationships through church, it is in the school that those connections and friendships, which are so essential for the survival of the faith, are formed and have a chance to grow affording the Protestant culture a real chance of surviving when it is divided among such a dispersed community.

As has been said here, the Constitution recognises the family as the primary educator of the child and makes particular mention of the rights of parents in the matter of religions and moral formation. In the light of the constitutional rights of parents, it is necessary that where the oversubscribed Protestant schools continue to be able to prioritise those of their own faith tradition notwithstanding that those pupils are travelling from very great distances away and which would not normally be considered a local area for a school.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** This is not about me telling Ms Rainsberry my views. I am just trying to get her views on the difficulties before we make our decisions. If we were to make a law specifying that a school could only prioritise Protestant children or co-religionists from within a catchment area and that it could not bring in Protestant children from outside that area, but if the catchment area were to be defined as that large area Ms Rainsberry described, would

that cause a problem for her school?

**Ms Linda Rainsberry:** If that is the case-----

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** That is what is envisaged.

**Ms Linda Rainsberry:** I welcome the suggestions that the schools define their own catchment area because the schools know from whence they normally draw their pupils. Then it is really just a matter of transparency and not a matter of restriction. If it is simply a matter for transparency for parents to know where pupils come from, how big an area the school serves and what are their chances of getting in, that is not a problem. However, if the catchment area is imposed on a school, it is most likely, particularly in the case of Protestant schools, that the catchment area is too small and some Protestant children will end up without a school to go to.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** It is certainly not what I envisage for catchment areas, which should be as large as necessary particularly for a minority faith school.

**Chairman:** Ms Rainsberry said that Kilkenny College is oversubscribed by 100% and that it can only admit one in two. What is the school's policy in choosing who is admitted in first year?

I know Deputy Burton also has a question.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** Further to Deputy Byrne's question, Ms Rainsberry said, as everybody knows, that almost every Protestant primary and secondary school includes children of other faiths and that a huge amount of effort goes into doing that. For instance, Dublin 15 is a hotbed for people coming from different countries throughout the world. The local Church of Ireland primary school is a very popular, as are most Church of Ireland schools. While I do not know the exact numbers, it has a level of diversity, but it has always been oversubscribed. During the time when Mr. Ruairi Quinn was Minister for Education and Skills, a second Church of Ireland school was established in Dunboyne for the wider Dunboyne catchment area.

Nobody has ever suggested that catchment areas would be based on dioceses if that was an inadequate geographical area given the spread of the schools. However, I have a complementary question. Would Ms Rainsberry accept it is good to have a degree of diversity in the school if that can be accommodated? It is good for the Protestant children and it is obviously good for local community relations. We need a balance between the school having the right to have a sufficient number of children to reflect its ethos while not at the same time excluding other children who may live relatively close to the school and would therefore find the school an attractive option in the local context. The Constitution reflects the right of religious freedom and expression; there is also a reflection of a right of a child not to be discriminated against. We are trying to balance a number of different things that are set out as objectives and ideals in the Constitution.

**Chairman:** I hand back to Ms Rainsberry, who will be followed by Fr. Connell.

**Ms Linda Rainsberry:** The Chairman asked about the admissions policy. The school, like every other school, has a published admissions policy. I cannot pretend to know the exact order of the seven categories. However, the first category comprises Church of Ireland children from within the united diocese and children from outside the united diocese. Priority is then given to siblings and for people with a proven connection to the school, obviously including teachers who teach in the school. At this stage applications are at such a level that the top categories

are filling the capacity and those who would not have any connection with the school would probably be in difficulty in getting places because of the oversubscription. It is a very acute problem. As I said, because the Church of Ireland schools are disparate and widely spaced, a Protestant child living in Mountmellick might end up without a place if preference was given to somebody living beside the school to take that place.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I know Dr. Fennelly's organisation represents not just Church of Ireland schools, but also Presbyterian schools, etc. Does it give any preference to Presbyterian children?

**Ms Linda Rainsberry:** Yes.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** On the same level as the Church of Ireland?

**Ms Linda Rainsberry:** No, the Church of Ireland would be the top category and beneath that there would be other minority faiths such as Presbyterian, Methodist and so on. It is the children of families who would qualify for the secondary education committee grant. It is whoever qualifies to apply for that.

**Fr. Paul Connell:** The second level system is slightly different from the primary in this regard. When we said that "catchment" might be problematic, it is that the definition of "catchment" might be problematic for us. I might use the example of my own school because this is a part-time role for me. My main job is principal of St. Finian's College in Mullingar, which is a diocesan school. Traditionally, we had many boarders from across the entire diocese of Meath and when we stopped taking boarders ten years ago, the patron asked us to try to continue to serve as many parishes as possible around the Mullingar area because Mullingar has quite a few second level schools.

Our admissions policy is quite simple. We take siblings first and after that the eldest by date of birth across the board. Interestingly, that leads to a very diverse school population, both in terms of religious affiliation and of nationality of origin. It is something that is seamless from our point of view. We do not dwell on it but last year, for example, when we were celebrating 1916-2016, on flag day we allowed the children from the other countries to talk about their flag in their original country. We discovered, to our surprise, that we had 29 different nationalities represented. There are many different traditions and approaches across our sector, depending on what part of the country one is in, and so we would argue there should not be a rigid definition of "catchment".

**Dr. Ken Fennelly:** On the theoretical point Deputy Burton raised about prioritising and who we should prioritise, and Deputy Martin raised it as well, we would not want a scenario arising, particularly in the context of the quota system mentioned earlier, whereby a Protestant family would be displaced by another family simply because a quota would be held back. In other words, if Kilkenny College was filling its places on the full gamut of Protestant people, we would not want a scenario to arise where a Protestant family would not get a place but somebody else would because it would be open to challenge. That would go to the section 29 appeal process and create all sorts of problems.

On the quota aspect, I am slightly uneasy as to how that might work in practice. I know it is a good idea that people are going forward in the west Dublin area and, as Deputy Burton said, it seems to be working but I am slightly uneasy as to how it might work in practice across the board for Protestant minority schools.

**Chairman:** I am happy to take any speakers offering now.

**Mr. John Curtis:** Broadly speaking, we have been very lucky in the second level sector in that we have a huge amount of diversity within our schools. The important point to remember, which Deputy Burton made, is that it is all about engagement at local level to see what might best fit in that context. The issue of catchment will vary from school to school but, essentially, all schools have communities and they are engaging as best they can with primary schools and primary groups on what might be best for that school in that area. There is a large level of engagement taking place. In the context of catchment, as Deputy Byrne mentioned, it is to allow that autonomy and to ensure that at local level there is that element of subsidiarity whereby it is the board of management that, by and large, knows what might be best for a school. The difficulty we have sometimes around legislation is that it might be too prescriptive and will take away that element of fluidity, common sense or knowledge of the local area that might be needed in the Irish context.

**Chairman:** I totally agree with Mr. Curtis. In my town, Newbridge, there is a common enrolment policy where the seven schools get together and agree that each school will take a certain number of, say, non-national children and children with special needs. Only one of the schools has an ASD unit so it will have a higher number but I agree that what the witnesses can do, together with co-operation among a number of different schools locally, can subvent many of the issues that can arise.

**Mr. Caoimhín Ó hEaghra:** Ar mhaith leis an gcoiste go labhróinn as Gaeilge. Níl a fhios agam an bhfuil aistriúchán comhuaineach ar fáil.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Tá ceart bunreachtúil ag an bhfinné labhairt as Gaeilge, más mian leis, agus tá ceart bunreachtúil aige labhairt as Béarla, más mian leis.

**Mr. Caoimhín Ó hEaghra:** An dtuigfeadh aon duine mé, áfach? An bhfuil siad in ann cumarsáid a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge? Leanfaidh mé ar aghaidh as Gaeilge, má tá sé sin ceart go leor. An bhfuil? Okay.

Díreach ag labhairt mar gheall ar abhantrach scoileanna agus an cheist a ardaíodh ansin, go stairiúil nuair a bunaíodh scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge ní raibh dóthain acu ann agus bhí siad ag glacadh páistí ó abhantrach níos leithne ná na paróistí mar a bhí. Tá sé sin ag feidhmiú go maith do roinnt scoileanna go dtí go dtagann brú ar na scoileanna seo go háitiúil. An pointe a déanaim ansin ná nach mbeinn ag tacú, b'fhéidir, má tá aon rialacha á leagan síos atá an-righin. Caitheadh solúbthacht a bheith i gceist ann mar gheall ar an gceist sin go bhfuil scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge ag glacadh le páistí ó cheantair níos leithne.

Tá contúirt ag baint leis. Tuigim go bhfuil 300 ceantar pleanála - ceapaim gurb é sin an uimhir - aitheanta ag an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna. Nuair a bhíonn An Foras Pátrúnachta agus na pátrúin eile ag déanamh iarratais ar scoileanna nua a bhunú, lorgaíonn muid léiriúchán tacaíochta ó thuismitheoirí sna ceantair sin. Tá bealach ag an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna chun déileáil leis seo nach bhfeileann an abhantrach nó an catchment area go minic. Mar shampla, rinne An Foras Pátrúnachta iarratas ar scoil a bhunú i Marino i nDroim Conrach an bhliain seo caite. Tuigeann muid ar fad i gcathair ar nós Baile Átha Cliath, agus i gcathracha eile, nach bhfuil mórán difir idir Marino i nDroim Conrach, Glas Naíon agus na ceantair sin. Tiománann tuismitheoirí suas agus fágann siad páistí ar scoil. Fuair An Foras Pátrúnachta 733 léiriúchán tacaíochta ó thuismitheoirí don scoil a bhí muid ag iarraidh a bhunú. Léiríonn 733 léiriúchán ó thuismitheoirí go mba cheart go mbeadh scoil lán-Ghaeilge bunaithe sa cheantar sin. An cin-

neadh a rinne an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna, áfach, mar gheall b'fhéidir go raibh cuid acu ar an taobh eile den bhóthar i nGlas Naíon agus ní ar an taobh seo, ná go raibh siad taobh amuigh den abhantrach. Caithfidimid a bheith cúramach nach bhfuil srian á chur ar sholáthar scoileanna. Tagann an rud seo ar ais arís go soláthar agus dóthain scoileanna a bheith ann den chineál áirithe atá á lorg. Dá mbeadh muid ag dul síos an bóthar catchment area a bheith ann, bheadh mé ag rá, “bíodh Gaelscoil i ngach catchment area chun freastal ar na páistí sna ceantair”. Deirim sin mar níl sé sin ann mar atá sé i láthair na huaire.

**Chairman:** I must apologise that there are no translation facilities available. We asked about that at the last meeting and it appears only one of the committee rooms has translation facilities, but that is not good enough.

**Mr. Caoimhín Ó hEaghra:** Can I come back in on that?

**Chairman:** Yes.

**Mr. Caoimhín Ó hEaghra:** I will avoid the need for translation. On that point, I appreciate the Chairman's comment and I am aware of her comments, and those of Deputy Byrne, made before Christmas when the committee met on the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill process. I have been coming before committees of the Houses since 2009, as has my predecessor, Dónal Ó Conaill, and we have encountered this issue with translation. I do not understand the reason the issue is not addressed. While some Deputies, and probably all the members present, can understand Irish and converse and engage with myself when I present as Gaeilge, I believe our contribution to the debate is-----

**Chairman:** It is diminished.

**Mr. Caoimhín Ó hEaghra:** It is diminished because of the lack of opportunity for Deputies or other attendees to have an understanding of the points we are making. I did make my presentation as Gaeilge, and I think it is important that it was made as Gaeilge. I am conscious, however, of the difficulty of some Deputies engaging with what we have to say as a result of that. I appreciate the efforts the Chairman is making, but I would ask her and other Deputies to please engage with whatever officers or whoever is involved and is responsible for this, and rectify the situation.

**Chairman:** Point well made, go raibh maith agat. I now call Ms Nic Gearailt.

**Ms Antoinette Nic Gearailt:** In the debate over catchment areas, there are two issues here regardless of what entry criteria we have. First, unless adequate school places are available, I do not think it matters what criteria we set down. I would acknowledge that post-primary is different from primary, but much of this debate stems from the fact that there is a shortage of school places in certain areas. Whether we define it by catchment or whatever other criteria, unless there are adequate school places the basic problem will not go away.

While new schools are needed to cope with the shortage of places, I am also conscious of what Senator Gallagher said. At both primary and post-primary level we must also be conscious that, in an effort to provide for diversity around rural Ireland, the problem is quite the reverse. In such areas, schools are struggling to maintain student numbers. By virtue of their settings, however, they are automatically diverse as we stand. Therefore, the issue is not as applicable when we move outside the troubled areas.

The second issue concerns educational provision for a changing Ireland, regardless of

school size or what part of the country we are in. The main criterion for entry in many of the 96 community schools is residence in one's local community and attendance in the local feeder schools. I do not think there is a community school in the country that lays down any other criterion, other than that a person is based and living in, as well as coming from, the community.

There will be an issue in future whereby we do have an obligation to provide - as the Secretary-General of the Department said recently - for students of all faiths and none. That is a separate issue that will have to be dealt with. Senator Gallagher mentioned the words "calm" and "considered". We need to plan for that and ask how we can accommodate parents who are quite happy for their children to attend religion classes, and those who want provision. There is a resource implication for that. We must separate the two issues of access to schools and provision. They are areas for two separate discussions.

**Chairman:** Yes, that is a fair point. I now call Mr. Mulconry.

**Mr. Seamus Mulconry:** It is interesting that the legislation has been drafted and we have had a long debate on religious issues in schools without hard data. That is precisely why we surveyed schools in the Dublin area, in order to provide hard data and give us a picture of what is going on. Most Catholic primary schools will take anybody who turns up. In point of fact, that means that our schools are very diverse. If one goes to Ballaghaderreen or Portlaoise one will find schools which have significant Muslim populations. Therefore there is no barrier to entry other than a lack of places. It is not our desire to have wholly Catholic schools. In point of fact, in the Dublin area I know of no Catholic primary school that is wholly Catholic. There are significant populations from other faiths and significant numbers of people who are of no faith. The issue is a lack of school places. Policy should be driven by data, not by anecdote. If communities are having specific problems - and I am aware and cognisant of the challenges faced by the Muslim community - then we need to understand what is happening.

The Deputy asked an interesting question on whether there were specific areas where there was a problem with the baptismal certificate. It tends to be concentrated, so it is not evenly distributed. There tend to be 15 or 16 here and there. When we did the initial research the first returns came from schools where there was absolutely none because they were taking everybody, so it is concentrated in certain pockets. I think that really needs to be addressed.

If one looks at the data, then there are certain areas. Our point is that over-subscription is increasing. About 18 months ago, a survey of diocesan secretaries was undertaken asking them if there were problems. At that stage we identified about 21 schools. We have now identified in total about 42 areas that are under pressure. Of those, there were 17 where the baptismal certificate comes in. The worst case is a particular location where there were 402 applications for 208 places. There were roughly 16 refusals based on baptism, but - and this is important - there were between six and eight people who were not baptised but were brought in because of the sibling rule. Therefore, this idea that there is some kind of blanket desire to keep people out is absolutely incorrect.

Deputy Burton asked if we could get an overall picture of what is going on in schools. We asked the Department of Education and Skills for that information. They said to us that it was not compulsory for schools to do it and they seemed to be unsure of some of the data they had. Therefore they were not willing to publish it. We would love that information to be made public because, if so, one would find - and I am absolutely convinced of this - that Catholic schools are reflecting the populations of their areas.

I am not sure whether this is around perception or fact, but in some areas there is an issue that Catholic students from outside the catchment area - and most schools in Dublin are operating some variation of a catchment area - are getting preference in Catholic schools and therefore excluding others. The issue for us is that there are three parishes in Dublin which do not have Catholic primary schools and therefore parishes around them have to take that overflow. That may be contributing to a perception that there is an issue on that.

I would love to see more hard data driving policy, so that we can identify where there is a problem, deal with it now as quickly as we can, and then ensure that we predict where problems will arise in future. Our schools are reflective of the communities in which they live.

I would also like to raise an issue that has not yet been raised, but which should be. I was speaking to my colleague in the Edmund Rice Trust which operates 33 primary schools. Almost all of them are DEIS schools with a focus on special needs and minority communities. Not one of them is over-subscribed, so there is something going on here that has less to do with religion and more to do with other factors.

Catholic schools are often picked out as the ones that are somehow to blame for all of this. I would remind people that we have the majority of DEIS schools and we cater to some of the most marginalised communities. My colleagues in the Edmund Rice Trust would be great exemplars; they run fantastic schools in the inner city and other urban locations.

What do we see happening where there is pressure in rural areas? The Department sometimes refers to white flight. In point of fact, what they are talking about is middle-class flight from town schools which may have an immigrant population, to smaller schools on the outskirts. That creates problems for some of our schools on the outskirts. Therefore there is much more going on in admissions than religion, and a sole focus on religion is avoiding the bigger picture.

I will ask my colleague, Ms McCabe, to describe briefly how she deals with the issue of opt-outs in her own school.

**Chairman:** It needs to be brief because three others have indicated. Ms McCabe can continue on from that and then I will call Ms Sultan.

**Ms Miriam McCabe:** I just recently joined the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, CPSMA. I am a teaching principal. This issue has come as news to me because in the rural community I come from, everybody is welcome. We are one of those schools that says, "We're open; please come and see us". We welcome everybody.

As a teacher, I find the idea that a child is left sitting at the back of the classroom a very sad image and not one of which I have experience. Rather than focus on an opt-out, we would actually have an opt-in. It is all about the level of engagement the parents want. Our school has children who are not of the Catholic faith and have never had problems. It is all about what parents want and that is what we provide. Those children sing in choirs and bring up gifts if they wish. They are very much part of the related artistic activities. These children are very much included and are never found sitting at the back of the classroom. I emphasise that point. From talking to colleagues, I know it is not the case in other schools close to mine.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** May I ask a brief follow-up question?

**Chairman:** I ask the Senator to be very quick.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I thank the witnesses for their presentations. As Ms McCabe has described, a number of Catholic schools have a wide degree of diversity. It is interesting that we are hearing that the baptism barrier does not seem to be a necessary element in preserving the ethos of the school. I am hearing that in many cases it has not proved to be necessary because schools have maintained their Catholic ethos without employing it. From what I am hearing, it seems to be linked more to a question of pressure on resources. Should we have the baptism barrier at all if in many cases it is not applied, but only applied at times where there is a pressure on resources?

I agree with Mr. Mulconry that a number of issues relating to inclusion need to be addressed. That is a very well made point. A good aspect of Deputy Burton's legislation is the proposal for inclusion to be a consideration and a criterion, not linked to religion. It was widely worded and may address some of the other issues the witnesses have highlighted.

**Ms Fardus Sultan:** As my colleagues have mentioned, the real issue is with resources. While there have been some wonderful examples of inclusivity in schools across the country, the problem arises in schools that are oversubscribed, mainly secondary schools because there is such a huge difference in the number of primary and secondary schools. Children of faith from new communities or minorities are facing issues when they try to access secondary schools. We are looking for some kind of balance in legislation and for legislation to act as a framework and guidance so that there is a balance even when there is a problem of oversubscription.

When there are enough places, everyone is welcome. However, when there are not enough places, there should be some guidelines that those children should also have the right to education so that they can be treated in a similar way. We are looking for a solution in partnership with all the boards and not looking for special treatment, just for equal access for the children to education. The problem is with oversubscription, which in time, if it is looked after with adequate resources, will be sorted out. In the meantime, there is a problem on the ground where children and their parents are faced with no choice or very limited choice. I am aware of the urban-rural divide in this regard. We are looking for some form of guidance and partnership with the other boards and from the Government itself.

**Ms Asiya Al-Tawash:** I reiterate what my colleague has said. We realise there are issues with resources and oversubscription. The same difficulties do not arise with primary schools. Muslim parents put their children into primary schools. Most of those schools are feeder schools into secondary schools. Like every other parent, they have the expectation that their child will go with his or her classmates to a secondary school. Suddenly they face the reality that their child is left out. A number of parents have come to me pointing out that the entire class has gone to a particular school but that their child cannot go.

I understand all the difficulties and I commend all the organisations represented here on their inclusivity. I know of many schools where children are really welcome. However, parents are coming to us saying: "I can't find a secondary school for my child. I have applied for six or seven different schools. I have paid an application fee for a lot of those schools." In the end their choice is minute. The result is that all of our young people end up in a block in the school that is not as oversubscribed or has a more open policy, which is not good for them. It is not particularly good for the school and it is not good for integration into mainstream society.

We have talked about immigrant populations and minority groups. In the two Muslim schools we have, 95% of those children were born in Ireland. They are not immigrants or from minorities; they are Irish children with the same rights as every other Irish child. It is important

for us to remember that point.

Regarding sitting at the back of the class, there are schools in Dublin where the Muslim community has provided in Catholic schools opportunities for Muslim children to have religious education. They provide their own teachers who are vetted and go into schools to teach parallel classes. The will is there to work with other groups.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** In response to what Mr. Mulconry said, it is something I have raised consistently in the Dáil and at this committee. I am very aware of the discrimination against children with special educational needs. I have come across schools that have taken in children, but the siblings with special educational needs are told to go to the school down the road. It is outrageous. It is not helped - I have also raised this issue - by the fact that the MLL inspectors will ask the school at the end of the week of the inspection why it has such a large proportion of children with special educational needs, but they never ask the school, which does not have children with special needs, why it does not have children with special educational needs or why it has such a small proportion of them. I am very aware of that issue.

I acknowledge and commend the work consistently done by all groups represented here in nurturing our children.

**Mr. Seamus Mulconry:** In terms of the ethos, our concern over not being able to give priority to Catholic children in cases of oversubscription is not related to the ethos. In areas with oversubscribed schools, there tends to be a number of schools in the area that are oversubscribed. In a recent article in *The Irish Times*, Kitty Holland wrote about her problems in getting her child into a school. She pointed out that she could not get into the Catholic school because of baptism, but in point of fact the list was so long that baptism would not have made a difference anyway. Her child could not get into the Protestant school. However, the inter-denominational school and the Gaelscoil were taking people from outside the catchment area. These things happen. If, as a Catholic parent, I was trying to get my child into a school there, I could find myself being pushed down into a school with another patron rather than into a Catholic school where I would have the ethos I wanted for my child. It is a concern around Catholic parents being able to access Catholic schools in cases of oversubscription because they could actually be disadvantaged where they could not get their children into other schools.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** Do we have figures to show that is happening?

**Mr. Seamus Mulconry:** I will be honest with the Senator and say we do not. I tend to think we should drive these things with data. That is why I would love to see some proper research into what is happening in Dublin. It is clear to me from the story Kitty Holland wrote that the problem in the area was oversubscription, not religion. If we had hard data, it would inform good policy-making.

The Senator mentioned children with special needs. I do not normally go for anecdotes, but one was given to me recently which was deeply shocking. A teacher had a Traveller child in her school, a lovely young fellow. He said, "Miss, I like this school. I do not get expelled from it that often." She asked him what he meant. He said that at his last school, he was expelled every couple of days. The school was moving the child on and the family eventually got the message and moved. That stuff happens too. It is not around admissions, but there are soft barriers which are not defensible.

**Chairman:** We received correspondence on the Kitty Holland article which we dealt with

in private session.

**Mr. John Irwin:** Coming back to Senator Alice-Mary Higgins, it was a point well made. I have no difficulty with it, but in the submission we made we were pointing out that the debate had somehow concentrated very much on religion when that was not the only factor. Very often, in fact, it is not the more important factor. In school admission we see inclusivity as the key issue. The soft barriers to which the Senator referred are something we sincerely hope the committee will be open to debating in the context of the wider admissions Bill and seek people's views. Under the new allocation model for pupils with special educational needs at post-primary level, each school will have a baseline of 20%. No school can put up a defence that it cannot accept a child on the basis that it is not able to meet a special educational need when that need is being provided for through the allocation model. We would like to see that issue opened for debate and discussed fully. Deputy Catherine Martin mentioned soft barriers. Anecdotally, we hear it also, but it is about the nature of inclusive education.

In terms of communities looking for non-denominational schools by choice if they were available, one is looking at the evolution of the education system. We know from where it evolved and can see in the later schools that have opened such as community schools that they are non-denominational. There will be a catch-up period. I note that the schools currently available are diverse and inclusive and very much aim to meet the needs of all communities. However, I take the point made.

**Mr. John Curtis:** I reiterate what my colleague, Mr. Irwin, said in response to Deputy Catherine Martin. There should not be a situation in any school where kids are not allowed in because of special needs. We see our schools as hugely inclusive. Every school has to have an admission policy and there must be transparency. If there are issues around inclusion in that respect, they should be looked at. I also make the point in the context of some of the difficulties encountered in gaining places in second level schools in Dublin, or nationally for that matter, that we represent the majority of Catholic schools in the country. In the context of oversubscription, in practice the Catholic faith is not used as a criterion in determining who gets places in a school. We are very glad to say that has not been the practice in our schools. Again, we come back to the issue of oversubscription. There are places in the country where, for a variety of reasons, there is a shortage of places and a number of kids are not getting them. That is the issue that has to be addressed.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I have a question for the JMB and, to a lesser extent, Mr. Mulconry. On Mr. Curtis's last point in particular, is the JMB arguing for the retention of the so-called "baptism barrier" rule?

**Mr. John Curtis:** No. In essence, we have the Constitution, the Education Act and the Education (Welfare) Act. There is legislation in place already dealing with the rights of denominational schools to give precedence to children of the relevant faith. What we must remember in broad terms is that 10% of schools in the JMB are of minority faiths. In that context, we have to look at what is necessary for them in maintaining their ethos. In practical terms-----

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Outside the minority faith schools, is it an issue?

**Mr. John Curtis:** In practical terms, the Deputy is right. Our schools are broadly based and diverse and, when it comes to criteria for oversubscribed schools, it is not a practice that is being used in our schools.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Except that sometimes there is priority for children in a certain school at primary level which might have the baptism barrier. Could it happen indirectly? The local parish school might have a preference.

**Mr. John Curtis:** I take the Deputy's point that there might be a knock-on effect in case of siblings and the children of past pupils.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Mr. Curtis is not making a strong case for retaining it.

**Mr. John Curtis:** We retain the right to be denominational schools. The ethos of our schools-----

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Is it necessary for the ethos to be retained?

**Mr. John Curtis:** The ethos can be retained in a number of ways. It is retained through the fact that we have the right to maintain them as faith schools, not just Catholic schools. What is important is the reality on the ground where the practice of our schools is hugely inclusive and reflects what is going on at community level. It is that practice that should be looked at. It is what is in place that should be recognised. That is why, in the context of legislation coming into this sphere, we are perhaps a little worried about what it might entail. We have a very diverse schooling system in this country. It is great on one level. There is great diversity in the second level system which works relatively well. In truth, we have few enough problems on the ground in this area. The few problems we have with oversubscription have to do more with resources than anything else. It is in that context that we make our point.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Does Mr. Mulconry make the case on behalf of his organisation that the so-called "baptism barrier" and the right of schools to prioritise children of their own faith are necessary?

**Mr. Seamus Mulconry:** To prioritise within a catchment area.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Okay.

**Mr. Seamus Mulconry:** Briefly, the advice we have been giving to schools since 2011 covers children from a feeder school; sisters and brothers of pupils currently in the school, which will depend on the type of school involved; Catholic children living within the parish boundary; Catholic children living outside the parish boundary who do not have a Catholic school within their own parish boundary, and other children living within it. What we are talking about is being able to prioritise within a catchment area. That is what we are already doing in most schools in Dublin. I cannot say it is in 100% of schools, but it is in most. The reason is very much the point I made about the Kitty Holland article. One could have a Catholic pupil or parent being disadvantaged because he or she does not have Irish to get into an Irish school or a pupil or parent is not Protestant and cannot get into the Protestant school. Pupils and parents want to get into their own schools and do not want to be pushed into a multid denominational or other patronage model. In essence, that is what our issue is.

**Chairman:** On that note, we have had a really excellent discussion. It has been great to hear the different opinions and about the diversity, welcome as it is in schools, and also the inclusivity. It is really a question and an issue of mutual respect. I take the opportunity to acknowledge the terrific work the delegates do in their own fields to educate young people. I note the many decades and centuries of religious education in the country and the generations that received an excellent education because of the ethos of both Catholic and Church of Ireland

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schools which we have traditionally had. They afforded all of us and those who went before us a great education. However, we are now in a new era. We have a very different Ireland and a pluralist society. We want to make sure that we have the best quality education for our children who are in school now, and those in the future. There is no doubt that the question of resources is absolutely huge. That is a key message we will convey to the Minister. I thank the witnesses and the members for their attendance today.

The joint committee adjourned at 6.20 p.m. until 4 p.m. on Tuesday, 21 February 2017.