

Choosing segregation? The implications of school choice

No.1 of 2015

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Editorial

Studies show that school admission policies, along with parental choice can lead to school segregation. There is evidence that this trend may be happening in Ireland and concerns have been raised that the policy of divestment, which aims to provide parents with more choice of patron, could unintentionally make schools less inclusive.

While geographic factors and housing policy contribute to segregation; this *Spotlight* focuses on school choice and how education policy can be used to make schools more inclusive. The purpose of this *Spotlight* is not to debate the merits of school choice *per se* but to look at the effects of school choice on segregation. The *Spotlight* also considers the policy of divestment in this context.

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Executive summary

Clustering

Recent Irish studies have shown ethnic and socio-economic clustering in schools. There is compelling research from Ireland and internationally to suggest that, apart from housing policy and geographic factors, school choice is a driver of school segregation.

School choice explained

School choice refers to both the selection of schools by parents and the selection of students by schools. It is argued that it can lead to segregation of the school system as parents take account of factors such as: race, religion and socio-economic status of a school's intake when deciding where to send their children. Also, schools may use admission policies which favour some groups over others.

In Ireland school choice is mainly discussed in the context of school admission policy, school patronage and the policy of "divestment."

School choice and the policy of divestment

In Ireland around 90% of primary schools are under Catholic patronage. Immigration, combined with an increasing secular population, has led to demands for more diversity of school patronage. The 2012 report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector recommended a policy of divestment, i.e. the transfer of schools from a denominational patron to another patron.

Some argue that divestment is a risk to social cohesion, and that it will segregate the school population along religious, ethnic and socio-economic lines.

How school admission policies contribute to segregation

The majority of schools in Ireland (80%) are not oversubscribed and generally accept all applicants; while the remaining 20% of schools operate selection criteria such as waiting lists which can work against immigrants, travellers and those who are new to an area.

Also, denominational schools may, if oversubscribed, give priority to students of that denomination. In areas such as Dublin, where demand for school places is very high and oversubscription is common, children of minority religious faiths and none may receive lower priority when seeking to enrol.

The recently published *Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2015* seeks to create a more transparent and fair enrolment system across schools. The legislation, if enacted, will phase out existing waiting lists over a period of five years. However, schools will continue to prioritise enrolment in accordance with religious denomination under Section 7(3)(c) of the *Equal Status Act 2000*.

School choice internationally

While education systems around the world differ in their approach to school provision; there are similarities in (a) how parents choose schools and (b) how oversubscribed schools select students through their enrolment policies.

Most OECD countries have introduced or expanded school choice for parents over the past 25 years. In general, research finds that school choice policies result in greater disparity between schools in the socio-economic profile of their students.

Solutions

Evidence suggests that in order to increase equality, policymakers should ensure that there are:

- fair selection criteria for schools;
- availability of information on school performance and on choice arrangements for all families; and
- support to schools which may be adversely affected through school choice.

A Common Application System (CAS), whereby applications are made to a particular patron rather than a school, has been piloted in Limerick, while Educate Together are also pursuing a CAS policy in Lucan, Co.Dublin. At the time of writing, no review of the Limerick pilot has been published.

The Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) has recommended that a national enrolment policy be put in place which would require parents to rank schools in order of preference. In this proposed system there would be one annual date for applications and one date for responses. This proposal has been criticised by the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) as being too bureaucratic.

Introduction

School choice refers to both the selection of schools by parents and the selection of students by schools. It is a widely debated area of policy internationally, with advocates claiming that choice:

- gives parents the right to choose the type of education they want for their child;
- makes schools more efficient; and
- offers a way for those living in disadvantaged areas to access 'better' schools than those in their catchment area.

Detractors argue that school choice leads to greater segregation of schools, as middle class and more educated parents seek out schools with children most like their own. Dr. Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educational expert, has spoken out strongly against school choice, saying:¹

“...nations pursuing such choice have seen both a decline in academic results and an increase in school segregation.”

In Ireland the school choice debate has centred around the following issues:

- a lack of diversity in school patronage, particularly at primary level;
- the effects of school admission criteria on student diversity; and
- the ability of the current system to integrate immigrant children.

Article 42.3.1 of *Bunreacht na hÉireann* states:

“The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State.”

The *Spotlight* is structured as follows:

- Evidence of segregation in Irish schools;
- Ireland's school patronage and school admissions systems;
- Changes to Ireland's patronage and school admissions policy;
- How these changes could impact on school segregation, with reference to theories around school choice; and
- The international experience of school choice.

¹ Washington Post. (2012). [How GERM is infecting schools around the world](#). Accessed on 20th July 2015 at

Ethnic clustering

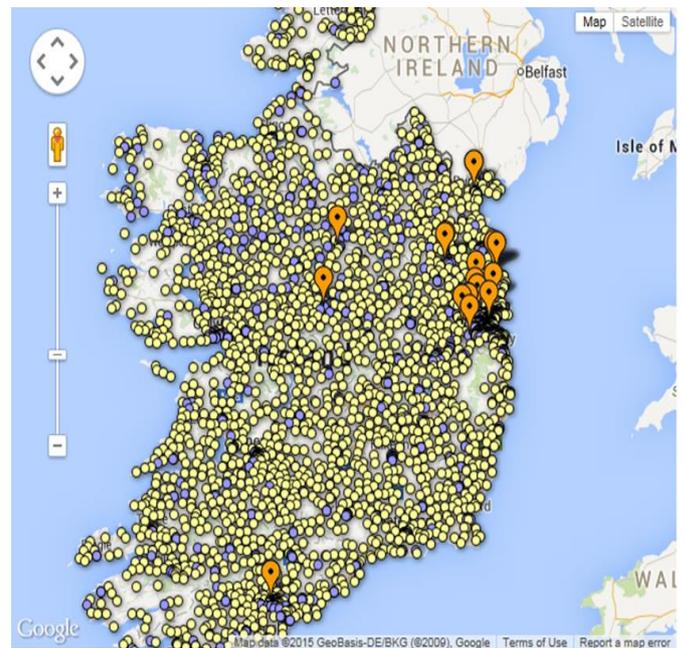
Segregation in schools

In Ireland it is estimated that 10% of students in primary schools and 8% of students in post-primary schools are immigrants.² According to the 2011 Census, the top ten countries of origin of non-Irish Nationals are: Poland (22%), UK (20.6%), Lithuania (6.7%), Latvia (3.8%), Nigeria (3.2%), Romania (3.2%), India (3.1%), Philippines (2.3%), Germany (2.1%), and the USA (2.1%).³

In February 2015 the *Irish Times* published an article based on data from the Department of Education and Skills annual school census 2013-14. The data show that four in five immigrant children are concentrated in 23% of primary schools.⁴

An interactive map (reproduced over) shows clusters of schools with over 66% of pupils of non-Irish origin (signified by orange icons) in North and West Dublin, with other instances in Dundalk, Athlone, Longford, Navan, Celbridge and Cork city.

Map 1: Department of Education and Skills annual school census 2013-14



Source: Irish Times (2015)

Segregation is happening even between neighbouring schools

While there are obvious reasons why geographical segregation may be reflected in the composition of schools, given some schools' use of catchment areas, more striking is the difference in composition of schools within the same locality.

For instance the *Irish Times* study includes data from two schools in the same town, where 86.1% of students in school A are of non-Irish origin, whereas, in school B only 1.1% of children are of non-Irish origin. A similar pattern is found, albeit to varying degrees, in other schools examined.

Similarly, research by the ESRI (2012) found that 44% of primary schools did not have any ethnic minority pupils; while in 9% of primary schools, more than 20% of all students were from an ethnic minority.⁵

² Taguma et al. (2009). [OECD Reviews of Migrant Education: Ireland](#). Accessed on 25 June 2015.

³ Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration. [Countries of Origin of Non-Irish Nationals Usually Resident and Present in the State on Census Night 2006 and 2011](#). Accessed on 14th September 2015.

⁴ Irish Times. (2015). [Census figures raise concerns of ethnic segregation in schools](#). Accessed on 9th July 2015.

⁵ ESRI. (2012). [School sector variation among primary schools in Ireland](#). Accessed on 22nd July 2015.

This trend was raised during the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection (JCESP) Pre-Legislative Scrutiny meetings on the *General Scheme of the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2015*, where one principal of an Educate Together school said:

“...there are schools in Dublin existing side by side where one is almost completely international in nature and the other is exclusively Irish...Essentially we are looking at racial segregation.”

Segregation has negative educational outcomes

Soderstrom and Uusitalo (2010) find that segregation can lead to poorer educational outcomes, as peer group composition matters for student achievement.⁶ A 2014 ESRI report⁷ found that school social mix has a significant impact on post-school outcomes and that these effects are far stronger than family background.

Research into DEIS (*Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools*) schools would seem to support this. DEIS is a national programme aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities. There are over 850 schools and more than 160,000 students, participating in the DEIS programme.⁸

Taking account of social background, children attending urban DEIS schools perform worse than those attending non-disadvantaged schools.^{9,10} Three main reasons are cited:

- teachers in urban disadvantaged schools tend to have less experience;
- DEIS schools have greater proportions of literacy difficulties and additional language needs in the classroom;
- DEIS schools have lower than average attendance levels.

Box 1: Characteristics of DEIS schools

Characteristics of DEIS schools are as follows:

- Children attending DEIS schools are more likely to come from working-class and non-employed households, with lower maternal education levels.¹¹
- DEIS schools have a higher concentration of ‘newcomer’¹² children,¹³ most likely because they are located in areas of low-cost housing, where immigrant populations are higher.¹⁴
- DEIS schools have more students with physical disabilities, learning difficulties and children from the traveller community, than non-DEIS schools.¹⁵

⁶ Soderstrom, M and Uusitalo, R. (2010). School choice and segregation: evidence from an admission reform. *Scand. J. of Economics* 112(1), 55-76, 2010.

⁷ ESRI.(2014). [Leaving School in Ireland: A Longitudinal Study of Post-School Transitions](#). Accessed on 14th July 2015.

⁸ Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. [Learning from DEIS](#). Accessed on 21st July 2015.

⁹ This was not true of rural DEIS schools.

¹⁰ ESRI. (2014). [Why Does School Social Mix Matter?](#) Accessed on Wednesday 15th July 2015 at

¹¹ ESRI.(2014). [Why Does School Social Mix Matter?](#) Accessed on Wednesday 15th July 2015.

¹² Newcomer students are defined as those from immigrant families where both parents were born outside of Ireland whether or not the student’s first language is Irish or English (Source: ESRI Research series no.8 of June 2009, p.41).

¹³ ESRI. (2009). [Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage](#). Accessed on 14th July 2015.

¹⁴ Devine, Dympna.(2011). *Immigration and schooling in the Republic of Ireland*. Manchester University Press. Pg 154.

¹⁵ ESRI. (2009). [Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage](#). Accessed on 14th July 2015.

Smyth et al. (2009) find that school Principals of DEIS schools believe that immigrant students raise the standards and learning expectations in disadvantaged schools.¹⁶

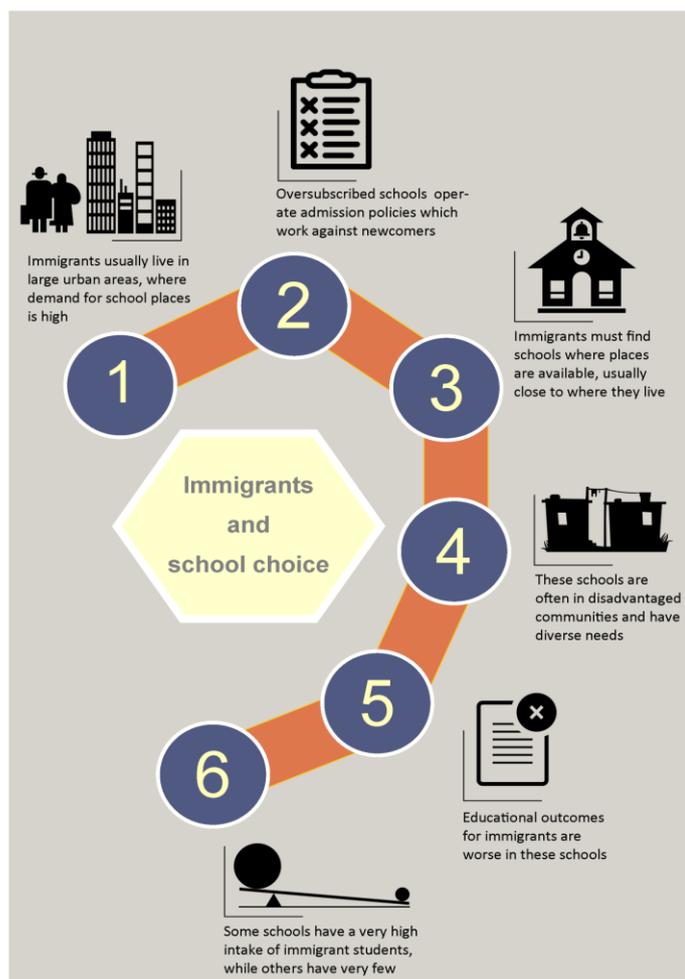
This may be because, as the OECD (2009) notes, the education background of immigrant students in Ireland is, on average, higher than their Irish peers and studies have found that schools, with a large number of academically motivated students, experience a 'culture of achievement,' which positively affects the performance of students from lower socio-economic groups.¹⁷

However, Devine (2011) writes that migrant children are found to perform less well in disadvantaged schools.¹⁸

While there is a socio-economic dimension to segregation, there is evidence that school choice can have pronounced effects on immigrants, many of whom find places in disadvantaged schools. The infographic illustrates how some immigrants experience school choice.

One study found that 18% of disadvantaged primary schools had a student population with more than 20% ethnic minority students, compared to 7% for non-disadvantaged schools.¹⁹

Infographic: Immigrants and school choice



Source: Oireachtas L&RS (2015)

¹⁶ Taguma et al. (2009). [OECD Reviews of Migrant Education: Ireland](#). Accessed on 25 June 2015.

¹⁷ ESRI. (2012). School sector variation among primary schools in Ireland. Accessed on 22nd July 2015 at https://www.esri.ie/_uuid/7c3b20b7-0671-43a1-8ca7-7d073b36e6d0/BKMNEXT221.pdf

¹⁸ Devine, Dympna. (2011). Immigration and schooling in the Republic of Ireland. Manchester University Press. Pg. 44

¹⁹ ESRI. (2012). School sector variation among primary schools in Ireland. Accessed on 22nd July 2015 at https://www.esri.ie/_uuid/7c3b20b7-0671-43a1-8ca7-7d073b36e6d0/BKMNEXT221.pdf

Ireland's patronage system

Origin of the primary school system

The national (primary) school system was established in Ireland in 1831 by the British government. The intention was that the State would fund any school which provided an education for students of all denominations together. Religious instruction was to be provided to students separately.²⁰

However, the churches opposed this mixed denominational system and by the end of the 19th Century most primary schools were under the ownership and management of the three main churches: Presbyterians, Roman Catholics and Anglicans.²¹

When Ireland achieved independence in 1921 religious instruction became a fundamental part of the school curriculum and schools remained under denominational patronage.²²

Patronage in Irish schools today

Ireland's education system is unique among developed countries, in that 96% of primary schools are under denominational patronage.²³ Table 1 shows the patronage system operating at primary level in Ireland.

Table 1: Primary schools by patron and corresponding population (by religion)

Patron body	No. of schools	% of total schools	Population	% of general population
Roman Catholic	2,841	89.65	3,831,187	84.7
Church of Ireland ²⁴	174	5.49	124,445	2.75
Presbyterian	17	0.54	22,835	0.5
Methodist	1	0.03	6,842 ²⁵	0.15
Jewish	1	0.03	1,984	0.04
Islamic	2	0.06	48,130	1.06
Quaker	1	0.03	925	0.02
Other ²⁶	132	4.17	n/a	n/a

Sources: Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (2012) report and CSO Census 2011 (This is Ireland, Highlights from Census 2011, p.105, i.e. Table 37)

²⁰ Book Review of Alison Mawhinney's (2009) *Freedom of Religion and Schools* in Human Rights Quarterly 33 (2011) 1163-1194.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector. (2012). [Report of the Forum's Advisory Group](#). Accessed on 20th July 2015.

²³ The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector. (2012). [Report of the Forum's Advisory Group](#). Accessed on 20th July 2015 at

²⁴ Department of Education and Skills (2013) [Value for Money review](#) notes that 74 Church of Ireland schools are classified as small schools.

²⁵ This population figure was not specified in Table 37 but was sourced from Table 36 (This is Ireland, Highlights from Census 2011, p.104). Table 37 was the table from Census 2011 employed in the [Update on Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in Primary Sector](#) (2014, p.7) report published by then Minister Ruairí Quinn in July 2014. Accessed at:

²⁶ Multi-denominational and inter-denominational forms of patronage: The Department of Education and Skills currently classifies primary schools as denominational, inter-denominational and multi-denominational offering education through the medium of Irish or English. This category comprises the John Scottus Educational Trust, Lifeways Ireland, An Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge, Educate Together, Education and Training Boards and the Model Schools.

Patronage is more diverse at post-primary level where denominational schools represent 58% of the total secondary school population.²⁷

Currently there are three types of secondary school:²⁸

- Voluntary Secondary Schools;
- Education and Training Boards (ETBs); and
- Community/Comprehensive Schools.

School admissions system

In Ireland parents are free to choose any public school for their child. There are, however, a number of limitations to this choice in terms of how schools select students, such as catchment area, priority to siblings etc.

Schools for which demand is greater than the number of places available (i.e. oversubscribed schools) are broadly allowed to draw up their own admission policies. For instance, a child's application may be prioritised on the basis of: where they live (catchment area); their religion (if it is a denominational school); whether their parent is a former pupil; or whether or not they have a sibling already attending the school.

Under Section 7(3) (c) of the *Equal Status Act 2000* denominational schools may (i) give preference to students of a particular religious denomination or (ii) refuse students not of that religious denomination. However, in the case of a refusal, a school would have to prove that this was essential in order to preserve the ethos of the school.

²⁷ ESRI. (2013). [Governance & Funding of Second-level Schools in Ireland](#). Accessed on 6th July 2015.

²⁸ ESRI. (2013). [Governance & Funding of Second-level Schools in Ireland](#). Accessed on 6th July 2015.

Section 29 of the *Education Act 1998* allows an appeal to be made to the Secretary General of the Department of Education and Skills regarding refusal to enrol a student, expulsion of a student, or suspension of a student.

Changes to the current system

There are significant changes planned for the Irish school system in terms of (a) school admission policy and (b) the patronage system. Both of these relate to school choice, as the first will decide how schools select students and the second will increase the choice of school for parents.

Making enrolment fairer

School enrolment policies play an important part in school segregation. An English review, published by the Department of Education (England) (2014) considers potential causes of school segregation that include the use of student selection by: residence, ability, and religious adherence.

Likewise a principal of Educate Together in Dublin contends that policies such as waiting lists and the prioritising of pupils from a particular religious ethos, puts migrant families at a disadvantage when looking for schools.²⁹ Waiting lists are particularly problematic for migrant families as, given they are not native to the local area, they cannot be on the school's waiting list.

Devine (2011) refers to other features of school policy which may lead to segregation, such as:

“...high voluntary subscriptions, expensive uniforms and elite sports cultures.”

²⁹ Irish Times. (2015). [Census figures raise concerns of ethnic segregation in schools](#). February 24th 2015. Accessed on 9th July 2015

Such policies are sometimes called 'covert selection policies'.³⁰

The recently published *Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2015* seeks to create a fair and transparent admission policy for all schools. The legislation, if enacted, will require schools to prepare and publish an admission policy, which includes a statement that the school will not discriminate in its admission of a student on specified grounds.

It is also intended that the legislation will allow for the phasing out of existing waiting lists over a period of five years. Schools will, however, continue to be allowed to prioritise enrolment in accordance with religious denomination under Section 7(3)(c) of the *Equal Status Act 2000*.

Stakeholder reaction to the Bill has mainly been positive. The former children's ombudsman Ms. Emily Logan (now Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission) was supportive of the Bill, arguing that it would give the Minister for Education and Skills a:

"...much-needed set of tools for the effective oversight of schools' admission policies."

Mr. Brian Killoran, Chief Executive of the Immigrant Council of Ireland stated:³¹

"This legislation is a real opportunity to correct the mistakes and oversights of the past which have seen children of a migrant background being clustered into specific schools..."

³⁰ ESRI. (2012). [School sector variation among primary schools in Ireland](#). Accessed on 22nd July 2015

³¹ Immigrant Council of Ireland (2015). Accessed on 10th August 2015 at <http://immigrantcouncil.ie/pages/articles/2015/40>

At the time of writing, the Bill has been published but has not reached second stage.³²

Calls for more diversity of patronage

While the school system in Ireland is still largely under Catholic patronage; figures from the Census 2011 reveal that the non-Catholic population in Ireland increased significantly from 1991 to 2011.³³ This is driven by the growth in the number of people with no religion as well as the religions of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia.³⁴

Box 2: Community National Schools

In 2007 the then Government decided to pilot a new Community National Schools (CNS) model of inter-denominational³⁵ education under the control of the Education and Training Boards (formerly Vocational Education Committees).³⁶

The objective of these schools is to accommodate people of different faith backgrounds and none.³⁷ Two pilot schools opened in 2008 and, at present, nine such schools have been established.³⁸ The Minister for Education and Skills is the acting Patron of these schools until they are transferred to the relevant Education and Training Boards.³⁹

³² The Bill can be accessed at this [link](#).

³³ Central Statistics Office. (2012). [Press Release Census 2011 Profile 7 Religion, Ethnicity and Irish Travellers](#). Accessed on 3rd September.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Interdenominational schools bring together Christians with differing beliefs and allegiances in a form of Christian ecumenism. These schools provide religious teaching for children of more than one denomination during the school day. An interdenominational school is under the patronage or trusteeship of more than one religious community (DES, 2011).

³⁶ PQ reference number 37099/09.

³⁷ The Irish Times, 13th December 2007. [State to open pilot non-religious schools](#). Accessed on 15th September 2015.

³⁸ PQ reference Number: 11159/15

³⁹ Ibid.

Organisations such as the National Parents Council Primary, the Irish National Teachers Organisation, the Irish Primary Principals Network, the Humanist Association of Ireland and Educate Together, have all called for a re-organisation of school patronage to reflect the diversity of modern Ireland.⁴⁰

The system of school patronage in Ireland has also been criticised a number of times by the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC), most recently in August 2014, where the Committee expressed its concern about:⁴¹

“...the slow progress in increasing access to secular education through the establishment of non-denominational schools, divestment of the patronage of schools...”

Policy of divestment

The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector was officially launched on 19th April 2011, to answer three main questions:⁴²

- how to establish what demand for diversity of patronage exists;
- the practicalities of managing the divesting of patronage as a process; and
- how diversity can be accommodated where there are just one or two schools serving a community with a static population.

⁴⁰ [Seanad debates: statement by the then Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairi Quinn, T.D.](#) on the Report of Advisory Group to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector. Accessed on 14th July 2015.

⁴¹ United Nations Human Rights Committee.(2014). [Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Ireland](#). Accessed on 14th July 2015.

⁴² [Seanad debates: statement by the then Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairi Quinn, T.D.](#) on the Report of Advisory Group to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector. Accessed on 14th July 2015.

The Report recommended that, in areas of stable population, where there is evidence of demand for different types of patronage, this demand could be met by divesting patronage of existing schools.⁴³

On 1st May 2012, the then Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairi Quinn, T.D., speaking about the report, stated that the State could not provide more schools than necessary to meet demand and so the focus would be on how to develop diversity within the existing primary school system.⁴⁴

Speaking on the report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, on 10th April 2012, the then Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairi Quinn, T.D. stated:⁴⁵

"Parental choice should be our main concern. Over recent decades, Irish society has been undergoing major political, social, economic, cultural, demographic and educational change. Primary school provision needs to reflect this changed society and provide for increased diversity."

Progress made on divestment to date

In 2011, new arrangements for deciding patronage for new primary and post-primary schools were announced and the New Schools Establishment Group (NSEG) was established to advise on the patronage of new schools.⁴⁶

⁴³ PQ Reference number: 33698/14

⁴⁴ Seanad Éireann Debate 1st May 2012. Accessed on 7th August 2015 at <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/seanad/2012/05/01/00006.asp>

⁴⁵ Department of Education and Skills (2012). [Press release for the publication of the report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector](#). Accessed on 15th July.

⁴⁶ Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Progress to Date and Future Directions. (2014).

A total of nine schools have so far been divested.⁴⁷ Mr. Paul Rowe, Chief Executive of Educate Together, is critical of the pace at which divestment is taking place. Mr. Rowe states that of the eight schools divested to Educate Together, only two are in buildings which were formerly a Catholic school, while one was formerly a Church of Ireland school.⁴⁸

On August 27th 2015, the Irish Times reported that one of these schools, formerly a Catholic school in Co. Mayo, now disused, will not be opening on September 1st 2015 as planned.⁴⁹

In a press release announcing the new schools, Minister for Education and Skills Jan O' Sullivan, T.D. said:⁵⁰

“While progress under the patronage divesting process is slower than some people would like it to be, it takes time to build local community support for new provision of school choice.”

Parents' views on patronage

In 2008 the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference published research which found that 48% of surveyed parents would choose a school under the management of a religious denomination.⁵¹ Furthermore 58% of parents, whose children were attending a Catholic school, said it was either important or very important to them that the school they chose was under Catholic patronage. However, 28% did not feel strongly about this,

⁴⁷ As of 14th July 2015, see PQs 29153/15, 29154/15

⁴⁸ Irish Times, July 15th 2015. [Minister should accelerate school divestment programme.](#)

Accessed on 27th August 2015 at

⁴⁹ Irish Times, August 27th 2015. [Educate Together national school in Mayo fails to open amid row.](#) Accessed on 27th August 2015 at

⁵⁰ <https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2015-Press-Releases/PR15-02-13.html>

⁵¹ Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. (2008). [Factors Determining School Choice.](#) Accessed on 8th September.

while 14% felt that this was either unimportant or very unimportant. The overall response rate to the survey was 47.2%.

In order to implement the recommendations of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector's report, parents in 43 areas around the country were surveyed in 2012.

Of these, parents in 28 areas expressed a preference for a wider choice of school patron.⁵² The choice was typically for an English medium multi-denominational education, while one area expressed a demand for an Irish-language national school (35 of the 43 areas surveyed already have a Gaelscoil option available).⁵³

The findings of this study have been challenged by Father Michael Drumm of the Catholic Schools Partnership⁵⁴ and Dr. Rik Van Nieuwenhove, a lecturer in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.⁵⁵ Both commentators have highlighted the response rates of the surveys which, Dr. Rik Van Nieuwenhove claims, range from 16-29%.⁵⁶

Dr. Van Nieuwenhove regards this response rate as evidence that parents are generally not concerned about issues of patronage. Furthermore he argues that the survey reveals a consistently higher percentage of parents who would not avail of a wider choice of patronage, than those that would.

⁵² PQ reference number 33698/14. Also Department of Education and Skills. (2013).

[Report on the surveys regarding parental preferences on primary school patronage.](#)

Accessed on 6th July 2015.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Irish Times. (2012). [School patronage survey queried.](#) Accessed on 3rd September 2015.

⁵⁵ The Irish Catholic. [Questioning patronage surveys.](#) Accessed on 3rd September 2015.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

How school choice can worsen segregation

The ESRI (2012) note that school choice is a broad term which incorporates the choices that parents make, but also pupil selection by schools.⁵⁷ The authors write that:

“...the profile of students in a school reflects the interaction between school provision, between-school competition, school admissions policies and the choices made by parents.”

Box 3: What informs parents' choice of school

Parents are sometimes divided into 'active' choosers and 'conventional' choosers.⁵⁸ Conventional choosers tend to choose the school which is closest to them. Active choosers are more likely to be middle class. They are more selective and typically have high educational aspirations and qualifications, and are well-informed about the educational system.⁵⁹

A review of the school choice system in England⁶⁰ found that, when considering schools, middle class parents look for performance and peer group, while those from lower socio-economic groups look for accessibility, friendliness of staff and support for those of lower ability.

School choice gives parents the flexibility and freedom to choose their preferred type of education for their children. This will differ in accordance

⁵⁷ ESRI. (2012). [School sector variation among primary schools in Ireland](#). Accessed on 22nd July 2015.

⁵⁸ Noreisch, K. (2007). Choice as Rule, Exception and Coincidence: Parents' Understandings of Catchment Areas in Berlin. *Urban Studies*, Vol 44 (7), 1307-1328.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Department for Education, England. (2014). [School performance and parental choice of school: secondary data analysis](#). Accessed on 13th July 2015.

with parents' values and perspectives on what a good education should involve i.e. whether it should be combined with a particular religious ethos or taught through a certain language.

Devine writes.⁶¹

"People are looking for something 'added' for their children's education. If I send my child to 'this' school instead of 'that' I am exercising my parental choice but it's based on my knowledge, expectations and sense of entitlement for my children..."

However not all parents are equally able to participate in this 'market' as low-income and minority parents are limited by fewer resources.⁶² A simple example may be a family which does not have access to private transport and therefore chooses the school closest to them. Also, research finds that parents from differing socio-economic backgrounds have different priorities when choosing a school for their children.⁶³

The mechanism by which parental choice can lead to school segregation is complex but the literature yields some interesting findings, such as:

- Parents from higher socio-economic groups tend to prefer schools with populations that are ethnically similar to their own and with smaller numbers of disadvantaged students.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Irish Times. (2015). [Concern school divestment policy causing ethnic segregation](#). Accessed on 3rd September 2015.

⁶² ESRI. (2012). [School sector variation among primary schools in Ireland](#). Accessed on 22nd July 2015.

⁶³ Gewirtz, S., Ball, S.J. and Bowe, R. (1995). *Markets, choice and equity in education*. Open University Press, Buckingham.

⁶⁴ OECD. (2012). [Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools](#), OECD Publishing. Accessed on 31st July 2015.

- Middle class parents are more likely to be better informed when deciding on schools.⁶⁵
- Ethnic minority families are less likely to send their children to school outside the local area.⁶⁶
- Immigrant families may not understand the school system of their host country and admission policies such as waiting lists can work against them;⁶⁷
- When social class background and parental education are looked at separately, parental education has a much stronger effect on school choice.⁶⁸

Could the policy of divestment exacerbate segregation?

Internationally, studies have found that areas with a diversity of school type have higher levels of socioeconomic segregation between schools.⁶⁹ As almost 90% of primary schools are under Catholic patronage, many are at present catering for students of many faiths and none, i.e. they are *de facto* multi-denominational schools. Some argue that divestment is a risk to social cohesion and that it will segregate the school population along religious, ethnic and socio-economic lines.

The Committee on Education and Social Protection, in its report on the *General Scheme of the Education*

⁶⁵ Gewirtz, S., Ball, S.J. and Bowe, R. (1995). *Markets, choice and equity in education*. Open University Press, Buckingham.

⁶⁶ ESRI. (2012). [School sector variation among primary schools in Ireland](#). Accessed on 22nd July 2015.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Department for Education, England. (2014). [School performance and parental choice of school: secondary data analysis](#). Accessed on 13th July 2015.

⁶⁹ Taylor, C. (2009). Choice, competition and segregation in a United Kingdom urban education market. *American Journal of Education*, 115 (4), pp 549-568.

(*Admission to Schools*) Bill 2015, concluded that:

“Multiple patronage and ethos as a basis for policy can lead to segregation and inequality in the education system. The objectives of admission policy should be equality and integration.”

Dr. Dympna Devine writes that school segregation is mainly seen in areas of high urban growth but could change over time, as choice of patronage widens.⁷⁰ Dr. Devine, in her submission to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism, wrote:

“The diversity of school patronage that now exists...can contribute to the establishment/legitimation of in effect ‘immigrant’ schools and racialised patterns of school choice and allocation.”

The Forum’s Advisory Group report claims the Department of Education and Skills is aware of:⁷¹

“...the risk of social stratification and segregation inherent in increased diversity of school provision.”

The composition of multi-denominational schools in Ireland.

Socio-economic status

Research by the ESRI (2012) found that, in keeping with international research, there are higher proportions of children from professional, managerial and technical backgrounds in minority faith (mainly Protestant) and multi-denominational schools than in Catholic schools (69%, 65% and 46% respectively).⁷² Also, maternal

⁷⁰ Devine, Dympna. (2011). *Immigration and schooling in the Republic of Ireland*. Manchester University Press.

⁷¹ The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector. (2012). [Report of the Forum’s Advisory Group](#).

⁷² Darmody, M. Smyth, E. and McCoy, S. (2012). [School sector variation among primary](#)

education levels were higher in multi-denominational schools than in minority faith or Catholic schools.⁷³

Table 2 shows the results from the ESRI (2012) survey.

Table 2: Profile of pupils by school sector

	Catholic	Minority faith	Multi-denominational
Children from professional, managerial and technical backgrounds	46%	69%	65%
Children from families in the top income quintile (fifth)	19%	33%	49%
Maternal education level (degree)	16%	36%	42%
Lone parent families	18%	9%	15%

Source: ESRI (2012): School sector variation among primary schools in Ireland.

Ethnicity

The ESRI (2012) also found that multi-denominational schools were more likely to have students from immigrant backgrounds (than those in minority faith or Catholic schools). The authors found, however, that when social class and education are controlled for, immigrant children are somewhat less likely to attend multi-denominational schools.

The authors speculate that the higher intake of middle class children is the result of two interrelated processes. The first is that middle class parents are more likely to make active school choices, including travelling further to attend schools; a requirement for most

⁷³ [schools in Ireland](#). ESRI. Accessed on 4th August 2015.

⁷³ Ibid.

parents whose children are attending multi-denominational schools.⁷⁴

The second is that, because of the small number of non-Catholic primary schools, multi-denominational schools are more likely to be oversubscribed,⁷⁵ and consequently use enrolment criteria. This can inadvertently favour those who understand the need to place their child on a waiting list, or who have prior links to the school.⁷⁶

However, in a letter to the *Irish Times*, Mr. Paul Rowe, Chief Executive of Educate Together, challenged the notion that Educate Together are a middle class option.⁷⁷

“Contrary to some outdated stereotypes, the proportion of Educate Together schools that are either in or qualify for the Deis (disadvantaged) scheme is greater than the national average, as is their provision for children with special needs.”

Why are countries increasing school choice?

The OECD published a working paper in January 2012 which looked at current policies regarding school choice in OECD countries.⁷⁸ The review showed that more than two-thirds of OECD countries have increased school choice opportunities

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Irish Independent. (2015). [Educate together schools massively over-subscribed](#). Accessed on 15th September 2015.

⁷⁶ ESRI. (2012). [School sector variation among primary schools in Ireland](#). Accessed on 22nd July 2015 at

⁷⁷ Irish Times, 29th June 2015. [Letters: Education and parental choice](#). Accessed on 11th August 2015.

⁷⁸ Musset, P. (2012), “[School Choice and Equity: Current Policies in OECD Countries and a Literature Review](#)”, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 66, OECD Publishing.

for parents over the previous twenty-five years.⁷⁹

However the author of the paper describes the debate around school choice as:

“...perhaps one of the most ardently discussed issues in the current education policy debate.”

Table 3 (overleaf) shows the choice available in OECD countries at primary and lower secondary level. The table shows that, in most countries, the proximity of the family residence to the school is the main enrolment criteria but parents may apply to other public schools if places are available.

Limiting school choice

Where countries do limit school choice, it is more likely to be at primary level. In countries such as Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Korea, Norway and Switzerland, for instance, students are allocated places nearest their house and parents cannot choose a different public primary school.⁸⁰

There is more flexibility at lower secondary level where countries such as France and Germany, which limit choice at the primary level, allow parents to choose another public school if places are available.

Countries such as Finland, Greece, Japan, Korea, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States do not allow parents to choose other public schools, at either primary or secondary level.

⁷⁹ OECD (2010), [“What school choices are available and what measures do countries use to promote or restrict school choice?”](#), in *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing.

⁸⁰ OECD.(2012). [School choice and equity: current policies in OECD countries and a literature review](#). Accessed on 8th September 2015.

Restrictions through admissions criteria

The OECD (2012)⁸¹ note that even where school choice exists, it is often restricted in various ways which, in practice, limit choice for parents.

The authors note that in 17 out of 33 OECD countries, if parents wish to enrol in a public lower secondary school, other than that which they have been assigned, they must apply to that school and satisfy specified admission criteria.

Such criteria may include academic performance. This is rare at primary level but more common at lower secondary level, where it occurs in 10 countries out of 33. These countries are: Austria, Chile, the Czech Republic, England, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Mexico, the Netherlands and the Slovak Republic.⁸²

⁸¹ Musset, P. (2012), [“School Choice and Equity: Current Policies in OECD Countries and a Literature Review”](#), *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 66, OECD Publishing.

⁸² Ibid.

Table 3: School choice policies in primary and lower secondary schools in OECD countries (2008)

	Public schools			
	Primary		Lower secondary	
OECD countries	Initial assignment based on geographical area	There is free choice of other public schools if there are places available	Initial assignment based on geographical area	There is free choice of other public schools if there are places available
Austria	yes	yes	yes	yes
Belgium (Fl.)	no	yes	no	yes
Belgium (Fr.)	no	yes	no	yes
Chile	no	yes	no	no
Czech Republic	yes	yes	yes	yes
Denmark	yes	yes	yes	yes
England	yes	yes	yes	yes
Finland***	yes	no	yes	no
France*	yes	no	yes	yes
Germany*	yes	no	yes	yes
Greece***	yes	no	yes	no
Hungary	yes	yes	yes	yes
Iceland	yes	yes	yes	yes
Ireland	yes	yes	yes	yes
Italy	yes	yes	yes	yes
Japan***	yes	no	yes	no
Korea***	yes	no	yes	no
Luxembourg	yes	yes	yes	yes
Mexico	yes	yes	yes	yes
Netherlands**	no	yes	no	no
New Zealand	no	yes	no	yes
Norway***	yes	no	yes	no
Poland	yes	yes	yes	yes
Portugal	yes	yes	yes	yes
Scotland	yes	yes	yes	yes
Slovak Republic	yes	yes	yes	yes
Spain	yes	yes	yes	yes
Sweden	yes	yes	yes	yes
Switzerland***	yes	no	yes	no
United States***	yes	no	yes	no

* parents not allowed to choose another public school at primary level.

** parents not allowed to choose another public school at lower secondary level.

*** parents not allowed to choose another public school at either primary or lower secondary level.

Source: OECD (2011), Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators. Table D5.1. Figures updated February 2011. Table modified by L&RS (2015). Full table available [here](#).

School choice programmes internationally

Every country has its own motives for expanding school choice. Generally the objectives are to make schools more competitive and to counteract the effects of residential segregation.

For instance, in **England**; prior to the 1988 *Education Reform Act* local authorities decided school catchment areas. The 1988 Act, however, gave parents the ability to express a preference for a particular government-run school. The Act introduced concepts of 'open enrolment' and 'local management' and, as funding was linked to the number of students enrolled, meant that schools had to compete for students. The rationale for the introduction of school choice was:⁸³

- to increase educational standards by forcing schools to compete; and
- to provide fairer access to schools.

Finland's much discussed educational reforms of the 1960's and 70's also involved the establishment of a common comprehensive school system at primary level. This has been described as:

"...the single most important education policy decision taken since Finland established its independence in 1917..."⁸⁴

Prior to this there had been a parallel system of vocational schools and academic schools.⁸⁵

⁸³ Burgess et al. (2009). [Parental choice of primary school in England: what 'type' of school do parents choose?](#) Accessed on 25th June 2015.

⁸⁴ OECD.(2010). [Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA for the United States: Chapter 5. Finland.](#) Accessed on 1st September 2015.

⁸⁵ [Center on International Education Benchmarking: Finland.](#) Accessed on 1st September 2015.

Some countries and jurisdictions will pay for students to attend private schools, using public money, usually in the form of school vouchers. This approach is informed by the thinking of the economist Milton Friedman. The OECD (2010) write:⁸⁶

"A school voucher (often referred to as a scholarship) is a certificate issued by the government which parents can use to pay for the education of their child at a school of their choice, rather than the public school to which the child was assigned."

In most OECD countries, these vouchers are aimed at students from a lower socio-economic background⁸⁷ i.e. they are targeted but in some countries they are universal, as in Chile and Sweden.

Chile, under Pinochet, introduced school choice in 1981 by providing vouchers to any student wishing to attend private school.⁸⁸

Five years after the voucher reform, the percentage enrolled in private subsidized schools increased from 15% to over 30%.⁸⁹ The initiative was part of a wider free-market package to decentralise school management and introduce competition between schools. It was believed that as well as making schools more efficient, this

⁸⁶ OECD (2010), ["What school choices are available and what measures do countries use to promote or restrict school choice?"](#) in *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Hsieh, C.T. and Urquiola, M. (2003). [When Schools Compete, How Do They Compete? An Assessment of Chile's Nationwide School Voucher Program.](#) Accessed on 29th July 2015.

⁸⁹ Bravo, D. Mukhopadhyay and Todd, P.E. (2010). [Effects of school reform on education and labor market performance: Evidence from Chile's universal voucher system.](#) *Quant Econom* 1(1): 47-95. Accessed on 30th July 2015.

would promote social mobility for children from low-income families.⁹⁰ The voucher system is still in use today.

Sweden introduced a universal voucher system in 1992 which allowed parents to choose to educate their child in a public or private school. Schools were not allowed to select students on any other basis than 'first-come, first-served'. As a result of this, there was a rapid growth in the number of private schools, which were mainly non-denominational and competed with public schools for students.⁹¹

Several cities in the **USA**, such as Milwaukee, Dayton and New York City among others, have also used vouchers to increase school choice. The intention is that, with these vouchers, parents are better able to afford private education for their children.⁹²

In addition, the USA has seen a growth in 'Magnet' schools (free public elementary and secondary schools, operated by school districts or a consortium of districts) which typically have a more diverse student intake.⁹³ Magnet schools do not use admission criteria and eligibility is based on a student's interest in a school theme. Diversity is one of their 'pillars.'

⁹⁰ OECD.(2012). "[A brief history of public and private involvement in schools in Chile](#)", in *Public and Private Schools: How Management and Funding Relate to their Socio-economic Profile*, OECD Publishing. Accessed on 31st July 2015.

⁹¹ Musset, P. (2012), "[School Choice and Equity: Current Policies in OECD Countries and a Literature Review](#)", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 66, OECD Publishing.

⁹² Forster, G. (2006). [Freedom from racial barriers: the empirical evidence on vouchers and segregation](#). School Choice Issues in Depth. Accessed on 30th July 2015.

⁹³ Magnet schools of America. See <http://www.magnet.edu/about/what-are-magnet-schools>

Does school choice increase segregation in other countries?

In 1991 New Zealand introduced full parental school choice to all schools, though not independent private schools.⁹⁴

A review of **New Zealand's** school choice model in three major urban areas (Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch) was published by Ladd and Fiske in 2001.⁹⁵ The review looked at six years of evidence since school choice was introduced and found that gaps between 'successful' schools (can easily attract students) and 'unsuccessful' schools (had difficulty attracting students) became wider under the choice system. This is because parents favoured schools which had a higher intake of students with higher socio-economic status (SES) and a low intake of ethnic minority groups. These schools became so popular that they had to operate oversubscription criteria. Meanwhile:

"Some schools were at a competitive disadvantage relative to other schools simply because of the initial ethnic and SES mix of their students."

In these 'unsuccessful' schools, minority and disadvantaged students became disproportionately represented. Ladd and Fiske (2001) also find that students in these schools performed worse in national tests.

Bravo et al. (2010) consider that **Chile**, with such an established school voucher system, offers a unique opportunity to evaluate how nationwide voucher reforms affect

⁹⁴ Ladd, H.F. and Fiske, E.B. (2001). [The uneven playing field of school choice: Evidence from New Zealand](#). *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 20 (1), pg. 43-64. Accessed on 28th July 2015.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

school choice and longer-term outcomes. Research indicates that Chile's reforms significantly increased segregation between schools⁹⁶ and Elacqua (2009) finds that public schools are typically more internally diverse (ethnicity and SES) than the typical private (voucher) school.⁹⁷

There are also allegations that private voucher schools in Chile 'cream skim' off middle and high-income students (private schools may select their own students, whereas public schools must take all students, if they have the capacity).⁹⁸

There is a historical commitment to school choice in the **Netherlands** and while public schools must enrol anyone who applies within a catchment area; private schools can limit admissions to students whose parents agree with the ethos of the school.⁹⁹

Over the past decade, the Netherlands has seen the emergence of what have come to be known as "black schools" i.e. schools where the student population is fifty per cent non-western immigrants.¹⁰⁰ The policy response has been to allocate more resources to these schools, rather than limit school choice.¹⁰¹

Authors of a 2009 paper from the Netherlands write:¹⁰²

⁹⁶ OECD (2012). [Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools](#). OECD Publishing. Accessed on 29th July 2015.

⁹⁷ Elacqua, G. (2009). [The impact of school choice and public policy on segregation: Evidence from Chile](#). Centro de Políticas Comparadas de Educación. Accessed on 30 July 2015.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ladd et al. (2009). [Parental choice in the Netherlands: Growing concerns about segregation](#). Accessed on 7th July 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Humanity in Action. [Education in the Netherlands: Segregation in a "Tolerant" Society](#). Accessed on 30th July 2015.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ladd et al. (2009). [Parental choice in the Netherlands: Growing concerns about segregation](#). Accessed on 7th July 2015.

"...unless policy makers actively intervene in the choice process, parental choice of school is very likely to make schools more segregated than they would otherwise be."

Arguments in favour of school choice

However, defenders of school choice highlight the positive effects the policy has on children living in disadvantaged communities. For instance, Gorard (2003) argues that without school choice, certain schools would be the preserve of those who live in desirable catchment areas. Commenting on the experience of England and Wales, he writes:¹⁰³

"Whatever the effects of market forces may be, the effects of pre-existing catchment areas and 'selection by mortgage' appear to have been worse."

Also, Forster (2013) of the Friedman Foundation in the USA quotes evidence from eight research studies that examined the effect of school choice on segregation. All studies were located in the USA and five were based in Milwaukee. One study found no net effect on school segregation, while the remaining seven found that school choice moved students from more segregated public schools into less segregated private schools.¹⁰⁴

In assessing previous studies on school choice programmes, the OECD (2012) warn that:¹⁰⁵

"Different political groups use evidence that supports their

¹⁰³ Gorard, S. (2003). [Integration in an age of choice. New Economy](#). Accessed on 6th August 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Forster, G. (2013). [A win-win solution: the empirical evidence on school choice](#). Accessed on 6th August 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Musset, P. (2012), "School Choice and Equity: Current Policies in OECD Countries and a Literature Review", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 66, OECD Publishing.

positions in favour or against school choice, and their positions relative to school choice are largely based on their ideologies, rather than on empirical work and evidence of effectiveness.”

Measures to reduce the risk of school segregation in Ireland

The purpose of this *Spotlight* is not to debate the merits of school choice *per se* but to look at the effects of school choice on segregation. So far we have seen that most OECD countries have expanded or introduced school choice for parents over the past 25 years. Generally this has been done with the aim of improving the social mobility of students who, because of where they live, find themselves assigned to disadvantaged schools.

However, as the ESRI (2012) write:¹⁰⁶

“International research has shown that such policies generally result in increased differentiation between schools in the socio-economic profile of their students.”

While it is important to acknowledge that there is evidence which suggests that school choice can counter the effects of residential segregation; this section will concentrate on measures which can mitigate segregation as a consequence of school choice.

The ESRI (2012) note that international models of school choice do not offer a single solution or ‘best way’ for countries to follow.¹⁰⁷

However, the OECD (2012) recommend that school choice be carefully designed to benefit both

advantaged and disadvantaged families, by ensuring:¹⁰⁸

- fair selection criteria for schools;
- availability of information on school performance and on choice arrangements for all families; and
- support to schools which may be adversely affected through school choice.

This section compares what Ireland is currently doing, which may mitigate school segregation, in light of recommendations by the OECD and other academics.

1) Fair selection criteria for schools

The recently published *Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2015* may, if enacted, go some way to tackling the barriers which face newcomers arriving to Ireland, as the intention of the legislation is to abolish existing waiting lists over a period of five years.

There is, however, an ongoing argument about the entitlement of denominational schools to give preference to children of a particular denomination (as legislated for in Section 7(3)(c) of the Equal Status Act 2000).¹⁰⁹ As 96% of schools at primary level are denominational, this places children of minority faiths and none at a disadvantage in areas where demand for schools places is high and schools are oversubscribed.

¹⁰⁸ Musset, P. (2012), “[School Choice and Equity: Current Policies in OECD Countries and a Literature Review](#)”, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 66, OECD Publishing.

¹⁰⁹ Under Section 7(3) (c) of the *ESA 2000* denominational schools may (i) give preference to students of a particular religious denomination or (ii) refuse students not of that religious denomination. However, in the case of a refusal a school would have to prove that this was essential in order to preserve the ethos of the school.

¹⁰⁶ ESRI. (2012). [School sector variation among primary schools in Ireland](#). Accessed on 22nd July 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

The counter argument is that parents have a right to choose to educate their child in accordance with their beliefs in accordance with Article 42 of *Bunreacht na hÉireann*. Also, Article 44 of the Constitution gives religious bodies the right to manage their own affairs. Furthermore, some stakeholders argue that in areas where schools are oversubscribed, it is the lack of provision of school places which needs to be addressed.¹¹⁰

2) Providing information to all families on school performance and choice arrangements

School performance

Parents and students who are applying to post-primary schools can look at school league tables which are published annually by the *Irish Times*. The league tables rank the top 400 secondary schools in Ireland according to the average proportion of pupils gaining access to third level education.

By the *Irish Times* own admission these league tables are 'flawed and imperfect'.¹¹¹ However, neither the Central Applications Office (CAO) nor the Department of Education and Skills provide such information.¹¹² These league tables are therefore the most complete picture that parents have of progression rates to higher education from a particular school.

While school league tables are controversial, a study which compared educational outcomes between England and Wales, concludes that abolition of league tables in Wales

reduced average GCSE performance and raised educational inequality.¹¹³

Box 4: Planning for future demographics

The Forward Planning Section in the Department of Education and Skills is tasked with assessing the impact of increased population projections on each school in the State. The Department uses Geographical Information System (GIS) software which works on datasets such as:¹¹⁴

- Enrolment data
- Teacher numbers
- Geodirectory
- Census data
- Child Benefit data
- Data from the General Register Office (GRO) on births

However, some argue that league tables are not an adequate measure of the education offered by a school, which also involves social, physical, cultural and spiritual development. The Minister for Education and Skills, Ms. Jan O'Sullivan, T.D. has referred to the 'hazards' of league tables;¹¹⁵ while her predecessor Mr. Ruairí Quinn, T.D. stated (while Minister) that he was not in favour publishing league tables and quoted US education academic and author Diane Ravitch that:

"...the goal of accountability should be to support and improve schools, not the heedless destruction of

¹¹⁰ Irish Independent. (2015). [Archbishop defends right of schools to put Catholics first in queue](#). Accessed on 28th September 2015.

¹¹¹ Irish Times, November 27th 2014, [Feeder schools: How to read the feeder school list](#). Accessed on 11th August 2015.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Burgess, S. Wilson, D., Worth, J. (2010). [A natural experiment in school accountability: the impact of school performance information on pupil progress and sorting](#). Accessed on 31st August 2015.

¹¹⁴ Department of Education and Skills. [GIS and School Planning](#). Accessed on 15th September 2015.

¹¹⁵ Department of Education and Skills. (2015). [30 January, 2015- Minister O'Sullivan addresses the IPPN's annual conference](#). Accessed on 2nd September 2015.

careers, reputations, communities and institutions.”¹¹⁶

School Inspection Reports are a further source of information on schools and are published on the Department of Education and Skills website.¹¹⁷ However, inspection reports are not available for every school.

Information on school performance is therefore not comprehensive and parents must know where to look for it. Also, school performance does not necessarily reflect the ‘best’ schools.

Explaining choice arrangements

The Department of Education and Skills has put together a guide to the Irish education system. The Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration within the Department of Justice and Equality has also posted this guide on its website.¹¹⁸ The Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration website also provides information which is available in several languages, such as links to the Citizens Information Board.

The Reception and Integration Agency (RIA), within the Department of Justice and Equality, arranges accommodation for asylum seekers. RIA also distributes information leaflets to parents (available in nine languages) which provide an overview of the Irish education system.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Department of Education and Skills 24 January, 2014 - [Speech by Ruairí Quinn, T.D. Minister for Education and Skills at the IPPN Conference](#). Accessed on 2nd September 2015.

¹¹⁷ These reports can be accessed at the following link <http://www.gov.ie/services/view-school-inspection-reports/>

¹¹⁸ Department of Justice and Equality. (2015). [Office for the Promotion of Migrant Education. Education in Ireland](#). Accessed on 10th August 2015.

¹¹⁹ Irish National Teachers’ Organisation. (2006). [Newcomer children in the Primary Education System](#). Accessed on 11th August 2015.

While there is information publicly available on how the Irish education system works, there is no guarantee that this information will reach those it needs to.

3) Managing choice through common application system

School choice is a feature of the Irish education system and, provided there are available places, parents can generally send their children to any school they wish.

One recommendation made by the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection’s pre-legislative scrutiny (PLS) of the *Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2015* was:¹²⁰

“Where a Patron has more than one school in a particular area, consideration could be given to requiring that Patron to put-in-place a common application system. Schools in a particular area should, irrespective of their patronage, cooperate in relation to admissions.”

Such a scenario would involve a parent applying to a particular patron rather than a particular school. If managed effectively this could lead to a more equitable student population in each of the schools concerned.

In Lucan, Co. Dublin, four Educate Together schools are operating a common enrolment policy which prioritises children according to age, those with siblings enrolled in a school, and catchment area.¹²¹

A Common Application System is being piloted in Limerick in fifteen

¹²⁰ Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection. (2014). [Report on the Draft General Scheme of an Education \(Admission to Schools\) Bill 2014](#). Accessed on 10th August 2015.

¹²¹ The Irish Times (2015). [We have allowed segregation to happen](#). Accessed on 10th August 2015.

post-primary schools.¹²² The CAS is co-ordinated by the Limerick Education Centre. The Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) has recommended that a national enrolment policy be put in place which would require parents to rank schools in order of preference.¹²³

In this proposed system there would be one annual date for applications and one date for responses. This proposal has been criticised by the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) as being too bureaucratic.¹²⁴

While there are some examples of school patrons working together on school applications, this is not the norm. The potential for a common application system to counter the negative effects of school choice has not been fully explored.

4) Support to schools that have been adversely affected by school choice

As already mentioned, the purpose of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is to address the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school to second-level education.

The DEIS programme uses a standardised system in order to identify the levels of disadvantage and an integrated School Support Programme (SSP). Currently 849 schools are included in the

programme: 657 primary schools and 192 second level schools.¹²⁵

On 9th April 2015 the ESRI published a report which evaluated DEIS over its ten year existence.¹²⁶ The report confirms that there is robust evidence for a 'multiplier effect' i.e. students in disadvantaged schools have lower achievement levels than those in more socially advantaged schools. The authors state that:

"There has been little discussion of whether the scale of additional DEIS funding is sufficient to bridge the gap in resources between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged settings."

The Department of Education and Skills has initiated a review of the DEIS programme, to be undertaken over the course of the 2015/2016 school year.¹²⁷ The process involves:

- a consultation process with education partners, which will inform the development of future interventions for those at risk of poor educational outcomes;
- the establishment of an interdepartmental Working Group to ensure a joined-up approach to future delivery of services in the DEIS Programme;
- the establishment of a Technical Group to examine what eligibility criteria is appropriate to identify the level of need in schools.
- the establishment of a DEIS Advisory Group within the Department of Education and Skills.

¹²² A factsheet on the Limerick CAS system can be accessed at this link http://www.lec.ie/media/docs/CAS_Information_Sheet%2015-16.pdf

¹²³ Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN). (2013). 24th April 2013 - [IPPN calls for CAO-style application process for school places](#). Accessed on 2nd September 2015.

¹²⁴ Irish Times. (2014). [Principals' group calls for CAO system for primary schools](#). Accessed on 2nd September 2015.

¹²⁵ Department of Education and Skills. [DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools](#).

¹²⁶ Smyth, E., McCoy, S., Kingston, G. (2015). [Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS](#). Accessed on 27th August 2015.

¹²⁷ PQ dated 24/09/2015. Ref Nos: 32514/15

Conclusion

As the majority of students, particularly at primary level, attend the school closest to them; school segregation is mostly caused by geographical factors. The composition of any given school largely mirrors the class and ethnic composition of the surrounding area.

However, in many countries, expanding school choice is seen as a way of counteracting residential inequality and offering children better opportunities. An unintended consequence is that school choice can lead to further school segregation as schools, through a combination of admission policies and parental decisions, become differentiated according to class, religion and socio-economic status. Evidence of this is seen where schools in close proximity to one another have a significant difference in student composition.

School choice has always been part of the Irish education system and this is unlikely to change. In fact, the trend is to increase the choice available to parents through more choice of school patron.

While reviews have not yet been published, common application systems, as undertaken by Educate Together in Lucan, Dublin and a number of schools in Limerick may offer a way to reduce segregation caused by school choice.

In addition, recent moves to further regulate school admission policies, should, if enacted, help to ensure that there is more equitable access to schools than has previously been the case.