

OUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY

BACKGROUND TO THE SURVEY



In April, 2011 the Minister for Education and Skills announced the establishment of a Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Republic of Ireland. It aimed to establish (a) parental and community demand for diversity; (b) how to manage the transfer or divesting of patronage and (c) highlight diversity within a school or small number of schools in a locality. The survey was commissioned to give detailed information on these issues. It contained five sections. Section 1 asked for background information about the respondents; Section 2 asked for reasons for choosing the school; Section 3 asked parents about their expectations for the school and Section 4 asked about how well the school met these expectations. Section 5 dealt with the religious beliefs of the parents. The results of the first four sections were used by the team representing the General Synod Board of Education during its session with the minister's advisory group in June, 2011.

THE SURVEY POPULATION.

	Respondent	Partner	%Total
Main Protestant	932	698	38.0
Catholic	438	527	22.5
Christian - unspecified	446	412	20.0
Other Protestant	136	104	5.6
Other faith	24	23	1.1
No religion	136	181	7.4
No information	34	198	5.3

2143 families responded to the questionnaire, representing parents of Junior Infants and Sixth Class pupils in 166 (85%) of all schools under Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian and Society of Friends management. This gives a picture of parents at the beginning and the end of their child's time in school.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they were "Christian", "Other Faith" or "No Religion". In the case of the first two categories, they were asked to "Please specify". Those who did not specify are termed "non-specified". Respondents were also asked about languages other than English spoken at home.

The distribution of different Christian denominations and the inclusion of people of other faiths and of none, indicate that the

The parents in our schools make up a cultural, linguistic and religiously diverse community

Protestant schools cater for a high level of religious diversity. There is a strong commitment to serving the community in an inclusive way and there is evidence that a variety of religious traditions are being satisfactorily educated together.

The religious diversity is not just in terms of grouping of different religious affiliations. Many families themselves model a level of religious diversity through inter-marriage. The Protestant schools attract and serve this religiously diverse group.

A range of European, African and Asian languages are spoken in 10.6% of homes. This indicates that the schools cater for cultural and linguistic diversity as well as religious diversity.

REASONS FOR CHOOSING A SCHOOL

In Section 2 of the questionnaire, parents were given 23 statements and asked how important each one was in their choice of school. They were then asked to indicate the ONE most important reason for choosing the school. The statements covered academic issues (reputation, standards, teachers), atmosphere (care and individual attention), inclusivity (special needs, parents), faith (patronage, ethos and religious education) and opportunity (closeness to home, size, link to post-primary school).

Scale	% Important	% Most Important
Academics	89.2	46.2
Atmosphere	81.7	21.0
Inclusivity	66.8	2.3
Faith Issues	55.6	17.5
Opportunity	54.0	7.3



In making a decision about which school, parents focused primarily on the academic and social development of their children, and on the reputation of the school in these areas. Other issues were of secondary importance. Other than on items relating to faith, there were very few differences between parents of different denominations on these scales, although females and those in rural areas tended to be more positive towards the school,

CHOOSING FAITH IN A FAITH SCHOOL

Religious Affiliation	Church Ethos % positive		Religious Education % positive		% Choosing item as Priority	
	Church Patron	Faith community	Christian faith	Focus on Jesus	Ethos	RE
Main Protestant	73.3	67.6	69.7	67.5	24.0	3.4
Other Protestant	41.4	38.5	68.2	72.4	5.1	20.6
Catholic	35.3	38.3	47.0	48.8	4.3	0.7
Christian- unspecified	52.5	52.3	58.9	58.9	10.3	4.0
Other faith	31.8	21.7	28.6	22.7	0.0	0.0
No Religion	6.6	5.2	11.1	6.7	0.0	0.0
Overall	54.3	51.9	58.4	57.7	14.0	3.8

The faith context of the school and Religious Education are important issues for the majority of parents.

Parents were given four statements related to faith in school. Two statements were related to ethos—the importance of Church Patronage and the link with the local faith community, and two were related to the Religious Education programme—learning about Christianity, and learning about Jesus.

The Table of results above shows the percentage of each group who said these items were “very important” or “important”. Most of the others said the statement was “moderately important” indicating a neutral position.

Church Patronage and ethos was clearly very important to the Protestant community, and 24% of Protestant respondents said it was the single most important factor in their choice. It seems they were confident that the other important areas were on a par with other schools

and this faith context was very important to them. For other groups, in the context that the Church and the local faith community was not “theirs”, the support for faith schools from other denominations is quite high. Some chose it as the most important factor in their choice.

There is a strong commitment to the importance of Religious Education when parents choose a school. For most groups, especially those Protestants who did not belong to the four main denominations, this was more important than who ran the school. Clearly, they felt very welcome in the school and appreciated the inclusive approach to religious education.



EXPECTATIONS OF THE SCHOOL

In Section 3 of the questionnaire, parents were given 20 statements and asked how much they agreed with these as something the school should do for their child before they left the primary school. They were then asked to choose ONE statement as the most important expectation they had of the school. The statements covered social issues (self-esteem, discipline), achievement (academic), community (sense of belonging and care for others) as well as faith development and inclusion.



Scale	% Positive	% Priority
Social	96.7	47.2
Achievement	93.6	21.1
Community	91.8	22.0
Faith development	49.5	3.7
Inclusion	66.8	0.6

There was strong agreement among all parents on issues related to social development, academic achievement and having a sense of community. Over 90% of parents expected schools to contribute to this aspect of their child's development. When asked to choose the most important area, almost 50% chose an item related to personal development. Parents want their children to be happy and well rounded. They seem to be confident that if this happens, the children will achieve their full potential.

As in their reasons for choosing the school, parents of different religious and philosophical traditions had very different expectations with regard to faith development and religious education.

Parents were generally supportive of inclusion issues, which included playing a part in the school culture.

Faith, Hopes and Religious Education

Religious Education is seen in the context of a holistic human and academic development.

Religious Affiliation	% Positive 6 Faith Items
Main Protestant	58.2
Other Protestant	63.4
Catholic	41.1
Christian- unspecified	49.4
Other faith	30.7
No Religion	5.3

Faith Item	Important %
Understand Christian Faith	59.8
Teach Gospel Values	50.8
Help Pupils Know Jesus	50.7
Encourage pupils to attend services	46.8
Teach RE at the level of other subjects	45.9
Teach pupils to pray	42.9

Six items, which focused on the academic study of religion, affective engagement with it and specific aspects of practice, made up the faith scale. There was quite a variation in the level of support for individual items, Parental support for these items would depend on their overall commitment to faith development and to opportunities available within their own communities for support in educating their children. The strongest sense of expectation came from the smaller Protestant denominations.

Parents distinguished different aspects of faith formation for their children, and clearly thought some aspects were more appropriate to the school than others. The same pattern of answering was evident among all the different groups, within the overall level of support indicated above.

Schools are clearly engaged in developing pupil understanding, and there are strong expectations that this should be focused on the gospels and on the person of Jesus. There is less support for the school's role in more personal areas related to practice—attending services and prayer, although these are part of the context of the school.

Parents also distinguished RE from the other subjects on the curriculum.

SATISFACTION WITH THE SCHOOL

In Section 4 of the questionnaire, respondents were given 19 statements about the school and asked to rate how well the school was doing on this statement. The statements covered a broad range of topics, including personal, social and academic development. It also included faith issues, inclusion and a question on facilities. Respondents were asked to choose ONE item that the school did best.

A striking feature of the results is the universally high approval from all groups of what the schools are doing. This high approval rating is true across all religious and philosophical persuasions, and in urban and rural areas. This is the context against which the other hopes and aspirations of parents must be read

What the school does	Well	Best
Academic and Social Development	97.2	80.3
Faith	91.0	4.0
Inclusion	90.9	3.8
Facilities	89.8	4.7



Whereas respondents sought a school for their children with varied expectations, especially in the area of faith, their experience of the school seemed to be highly satisfactory. The main focus of parents' evaluation is on the academic and social development of their children. They see the school as a "school" first, and then as a faith school. Faith issues are seen in a holistic way and these are judged in the context of the excellence of the academic and pastoral service offered by the school. This is especially true for those parents who are not enthusiastic about, but not antagonistic to, faith issues in school.

THE WIDER CONTRIBUTION OF FAITH SCHOOLS

Parents rate all aspects of our schools very highly

Reason for Choosing School	Attitude to Patronage	
	Negative/ Neutral	Positive
The school is inclusive of pupils with special needs	55.4	69.7
The welcome given to pupils with Special Needs	52.6	73.0
The high level of parental involvement in decision-making	54.9	70.0
The Cultural life of the school	56.2	80.5



As well as the contribution made to the personal and family lives of their pupils, the schools make a positive contribution to the public policy of pluralism and diversity. Parents who support Church patronage are also likely to support Patron values in the area of social inclusion and outreach other than in the Religious Education programme. The results of the survey show that the schools give active support to these policies, making a valuable contribution to the education system and to society.

The survey was designed by Dr. David Tuohy SJ, Dr. Anne Lodge and Dr. Ken Fennelly. It is based on similar work conducted by the Australian Council of Educational Research in 2009. The Survey was sponsored by the Church of Ireland Primary Schools Managers Association, the Church of Ireland College of Education. And the General Synod Board of Education.

The team is grateful to the school Principals for their support in distributing and collecting the survey, and to Gillian Beckett for her work in inputting the data. In particular, we thank the many parents who took time to fill in the questionnaire.